

School of Theology at Claremont



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# INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

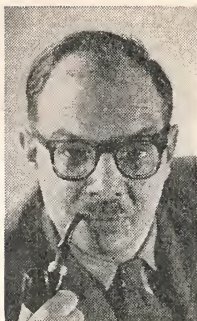
E. H. PYLE AND  
S. G. WILLIAMSON

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*Cambridge Daily News*



*Jasmine Rose-Innes*

Eric Pyle (*left*), born in 1918, grew up in Devonshire and graduated in Natural Sciences at Cambridge. After seven years as a schoolmaster he returned to Cambridge to read theology, and in 1950 was ordained as minister of Felixstowe Congregational Church. In 1952 he went to Ghana as Lecturer in Theology at the University College, where he remained for five years, before returning to Cambridge as a tutor at Cheshunt College, of which he became President in 1959. He is married and has four children.

The late Dr S. G. Williamson was born in 1906 and attended Bristol Grammar School. After some years in business he took a degree in theology and philosophy at Birmingham University and was ordained as a Methodist Minister. In 1933 he joined the staff of Wesley College, Kumasi, and was appointed first Principal of the joint Methodist and Presbyterian Theological College there in 1942. Later Dr Williamson, who was married and had two children, was for nine years Senior Lecturer in Divinity at the University College of Ghana, where in all he had lived for 26 years.

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E. H. PYLE AND  
S. G. WILLIAMSON

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*Introducing Christianity*

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## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| PREFACE  | 7   |
| 1. <i>Introduction</i>                               | 9   |
| 2. <i>What Did Jesus Assume in His Hearers?</i>      | 20  |
| 3. <i>Jesus and the People Who Knew Him</i>          | 40  |
| 4. <i>The First Preaching and Fellowship</i>         | 61  |
| 5. <i>St Paul: Apostle and Exponent of the Faith</i> | 81  |
| 6. <i>Expansion and Consolidation</i>                | 106 |
| 7. <i>The Uniqueness of Christianity</i>             | 126 |
| FURTHER READING                                      | 155 |

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## Preface

THE authors are conscious of their indebtedness to a large number of theologians whose works have influenced their thinking. Where the borrowing of phrases and ideas is discerned the absence of acknowledgement may perhaps be forgiven, since footnotes in a book of this nature would be burdensome. Mention must however be made of Professor C. H. Dodd, Dr Vincent Taylor, and Dr J. S. Whale, some of whose works are mentioned in the suggestions for further reading, on pages 155-8. In addition the authors are especially grateful to Professor H. H. Farmer of Cambridge University, and Professor J. Arthur Martin of Wheaton College, Massachusetts, both of whom kindly read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions.

All references to the Christian Scriptures are, unless otherwise stated, to the *Revised Version* (1881).

E. H. PYLE

S. G. WILLIAMSON

January 1959

[The Rev. S. G. Williamson did not live to see this work in print. Through its pages, especially to the African friends he loved so well, 'he, being dead, yet speaketh'. - E. H. P.]





## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

IN 1876 a missionary visited Kumasi, hoping to secure the goodwill of the Ashanti King and to obtain the lease of some land on which to build a school and church. He was received with courtesy and kindness, but his request for land was refused. The Asantehene is reported as saying, 'The Bible is not a book for us. God at the beginning gave the Bible to the White people, another book to the Cramos (Muslims), and the fetish to us. . . . We know God already ourselves.'\*

Is this claim justified? The world has many religions. Is each suited to the people who practise it? To what extent, and in what way, do religions differ from one another? Are some religions of higher quality than others, and if so on what grounds may such a judgement be made? Christians engage in missionary activity, seeking to convert men of other faiths to their own. So, of course, do Muslims, and Christians and Muslims seek to convert each other. The Asantehene stated his belief that each nation had a religion suitable to itself.

\* Findlay, G. G., and Holdsworth, W. W., *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, Vol. IV, p. 175, London, 1921.

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

The Christian and the Muslim, by their missionary activity, are asserting their belief that some religions, particularly their own, are better than other religions.

The purpose of this book is to discuss the grounds on which Christians claim that their religion alone is wholly true. Why should Christians in Europe and America feel constrained to seek the conversion of those of the Muslim or traditional African faiths? Why does the African Christian feel that his religion is superior to that of his fathers? Why not permit each man to express himself religiously as he wishes? Do not all religious faiths express substantially the same truths?

Faced with such questions the individual Christian might answer in various ways, but each answer would involve the claim that Christianity is specific and unique among the religions of the world. The Christian apologist would say something like this: that, while God has been in some part apprehended in all the world's religions, it is only in the revelation vouchsafed to mankind in Jesus of Nazareth that God is fully and finally known, and that what God has done for man in Jesus Christ is of universal and final significance. While the Muslim worships *Allah* on the basis of the revelation through Muhammad in the *Qur'ān*, while the Animist worships the Supreme Being and the many spirit-powers of Nature, and while

## INTRODUCTION

both Muslim and Animist by so doing express themselves religiously, all that they seek and find in their God or gods finds its fulfilment, its re-statement, its ultimate meaning, in the revelation that comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because he so believes, the Christian is compelled by the very nature of the faith he holds to be an evangelist and missionary. The scientist who has discovered a new fact publishes it; he desires other scientists to know of it, so that the new fact may be incorporated into the total body of scientific knowledge. Some facts so discovered are of such a nature that they do more than add to the stock of scientific knowledge; they demand that former theories and hypotheses be recast. For example, Thomson's experiments with X-rays in 1899 made it clear that atoms could no longer be regarded as indivisible particles, but had a structure which could be described in terms of smaller electrically-charged particles. So began the scientific revolution which has led to the fulfilment of the alchemist's dream that matter might be transmuted, and to the discovery in recent years of the means whereby the tremendous energy of the atomic nucleus may be released and harnessed for the benefit (or destruction) of mankind. A medical research worker who finds a new cure for a dread disease publishes his knowledge to the whole world, that mankind

may benefit from his discovery; and soon a new medicine or a new technique is available for use in hospitals and clinics.

The Christian experiences the same kind of compulsion about his religion: it is a revelation to man, a discovery by man, which may not be hidden. It must be published to the world, not as something which may be added to the rest of the world's knowledge about God, but as a new discovery, of the type which requires men everywhere to change their religious hypotheses. In the realm of religious thought and experience, Christianity is a radical and revolutionary fact.

Now it is not to be expected that the Muslim or the Animist, or any non-Christian, will agree to the Christian claim. He will demand demonstration, he will require some kind of proof. He will ask, on what grounds do you claim that the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is full and final? So challenged, the Christian must answer. But in what terms is he to answer? In the sphere of religion, how do you prove what you believe is true? The Muslim believes that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah, and – for he is also a missionary – that his faith should be acceptable to all men; but how would he prove this? How would the Animist prove that when he worships at the shrine, or makes his offering to the Supreme Being, what he is doing is truth and not falsehood? When ques-



## INTRODUCTION

tions of the true and the false in the world of religion are raised, what are the criteria, what are the grounds of faith, what are the valid facts which support a conclusion? Can some light be shed on these difficult questions?

A beginning may be made by stating that *religion can be lived but it cannot be argued*. This does not mean that one cannot argue about all sorts of very important religious questions. Thus it is possible to discuss whether witchcraft has the powers it claims, and whether recourse to a god, or the wearing of some kind of charm, will in fact give protection. We can ask whether the *Qur'ān* shows dependence on Jewish and Christian sources, and the matter can be argued by marshalling facts and evidence. One can inquire whether the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a fact, or whether it was a story put into circulation by his disciples. There is always a great deal that can be investigated, discussed, and argued about, whether between the followers of one religion and those of another, or concerning the facts of one particular religion.

Indeed, the Christian would hold that it is the plain duty of the intelligent man to use his reason in the service of his religious faith. Jesus of Nazareth commanded his followers to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*, and with all your strength' (Mark 12: 30). No religion in the world has been

subjected, by its own followers, to such critical inspection and consistent, detailed analysis as the Christian faith. Christianity welcomes and encourages the free and sincere use of the mind, and is prepared to ask such questions as: Is there something in the faith of the Christian which justifies missionary activity? What are the specific characteristics which mark off Christianity from other religions? Do these show Christianity to be final and unique?

It is not the purpose of this introduction to supply the answers, but to point out that these are the questions to be treated in the following pages. The writers, who are committed Christians, can only present Christianity as they see it; they do not claim that their interpretation is either original or free from bias. They do hold, however, that what is here set forth can be so strongly supported from a study of the documentary evidence, and of the beliefs and practices of existing groups of Christians, that it can claim the thoughtful attention of those who would differ from the authors, both those within the Church and those outside its fellowship who are indifferent or opposed to missionary activity.

Specific facts and beliefs will be brought to the reader's notice. He is invited to consider whether, when viewed in this way, Christianity is not in a real sense both 'unique' and 'final' among religions. The basis of this seemingly extravagant



## INTRODUCTION

claim (as it must appear to be in the eyes of non-Christians) will be examined first by reference to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in their impact upon his contemporaries, both disciples and enemies, and then by an analysis of the main elements in the spiritual encounter between the first disciples and the God revealed in Christ, as these became decisive in the formulation of the Christian faith expressed in the New Testament as a whole. The sixth chapter briefly indicates the lines on which Christianity expanded and consolidated itself, so becoming the faith now expressed through the institutionalized forms propagated on the mission fields. The last chapter will deal with the question uppermost in our minds, the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

With the material thus presented in his hand, the reader will be equipped to consider the Christian claim. Yet it must again be emphasized that Christianity is a religion, and while a religion may be expressed and lived, it cannot, in the final analysis, be argued. A faith may be proclaimed; it cannot be intellectually demonstrated, at least not to the point where it will satisfy the requirements of faith. Questions can be answered, and a sincere attempt made to set intellectual doubts at rest. But faith requires the response of the whole man, a response which goes beyond intellectual conviction or intellectual assent. A Muslim and a Christian might

argue who is superior, Muhammad or Christ? Each may have points of comparison to advance, each may sow seeds of doubt in the mind of the other, each may suggest new angles of thought, new facts for consideration; but in the end, if either is to be convinced, it will not be because of a process both initiated and concluded by argument, but by an act of response of the whole man to Muhammad or to Christ.

Similarly, the Animist is unlikely to be convinced by the intellectual arguments which raise doubts about the reality of witchcraft or the real existence of the gods. What converts the Animist, if he is to be converted to Christ, is his perception that Christ offers him a protection, a spiritual certainty, a decisive religious experience that outbids the power of the witch to frighten him or of his old gods to sustain him. In other words, what is at issue, when all the discussion and argument dies down, is personal religious experience and spiritual satisfaction. The Old Testament invitation is, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps. 34: 8); and the Jesus of the Gospels speaks to men in the same terms: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matt. 11: 28). In Christianity, truth is proclaimed, and the hearer is invited to respond.

What then do Christians say to the rest of the world? They recognize that there is one God 'who

## INTRODUCTION

is over all, and in all, and through all'. Among most peoples this has been recognized, and is expressed in the different creeds men hold and the faiths they follow. Christians claim, however, that God has been active in his world not only in a general manner, so that all men seek after him and find him, but also in a particular way. They hold that God has revealed himself, in part through the people called the Jews, of whom came Jesus of Nazareth; and that, in the person and work of Jesus, there is expressed for all mankind in a sufficient and final manner the will and the purpose of God. Jesus of Nazareth fulfils all faiths, and declares for man all that may be known of God. And more than this, for Christianity is not revelation in the sense of new knowledge, but revelation in the sense of redemption. God spoke and acted in Jesus, thus meeting man's need to the uttermost. As Paul states it, the Gospel is 'the power of God unto salvation'; it asserts and proclaims the presence of God in his redeeming power, to succour men in their response to the Divine demand.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God's demand for perfect obedience and personal responsiveness to the Divine righteousness and love is set forth, and God's succour, whereby man becomes what God desires him to be, is made available. In other words, the knowledge of God which is offered to any man or woman through Jesus can only be fully given to

that man or woman in the experience of living in faith; and this means living by the inspiration of a confident response to Jesus. Intellectual arguments can do a great deal to clear away from men's minds the doubts and misunderstandings which make the act of faith more difficult, but such arguments can never convey the whole truth about God in Christ.

This statement of the Christian claim will raise many difficulties for the non-Christian reader; nevertheless the authors hope that such difficulties will encourage him to read further, and not to put the book aside. Not least among the difficulties is the fact that most non-Christians find it impossible to believe that man is not as God desires him to be. Herein lies a stumbling block for Muslim and Animist alike, who do not see man as the Christian does. It is essential to an understanding of the Christian faith to grasp that, in terms of the Christian revelation, man, made for response to God, can fail to make this response. Christianity holds to a real freedom of the human person. Not only does this mean on the one side that man is unresponsive to God, but it also indicates that only by an act of moral choice, made possible indeed by the grace of God, does a man enter into the revelation and redemption wrought by God in Christ.

For this reason Christianity can only be presented, in the end, for acceptance or rejection, as indeed in the days of his flesh Jesus knew himself



## INTRODUCTION

accepted by his disciples but rejected by the Jews. Thus there is the supreme call to believe. And it is the consequences of this belief which are, in the last resort, the proof of the spiritual power and validity of the Christian faith. In thus introducing Christianity to the reader it is the authors' hope that they may be contributing to the much more important and vital business of introducing him to the Christ who is, according to Paul the Apostle, 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1 : 24).

*What Did Jesus Assume in His Hearers?*

JESUS of Nazareth was a Jew, born to Jewish parents, brought up in a Jewish home, educated in a Jewish environment, nurtured in the best traditions of his people. It was claimed that he came of the royal house and lineage (Luke 2: 4). His ministry, except for an occasional journey just beyond the borders of his country, was carried on among his own people. His first disciples were Jews, and the first Christian fellowship was located in Jerusalem. Christianity began as a movement among the Jews, and only gradually became a universal religion.

In his day and generation Jesus of Nazareth moved among his people as a Rabbi, or teacher. He could assume their adherence to the ancient Jewish faith in which he and they had been reared. Of this faith it is essential to give some account, since Jesus shared it with his hearers. This we are well able to do, because the sacred writings of the Jewish people have been incorporated by the Christian Church into, and form the larger portion of, its own sacred Scriptures, as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Thus Christianity's roots lie deep in the ancient Jewish faith.



## WHAT DID JESUS ASSUME?

The Old Testament is pre-eminently a record of the religious history and experience of the Jews. Though in itself but the remnants of a nation's religious literature, handed down from antiquity and translated from the original Hebrew and Aramaic, the Old Testament for the average man is a massive selection of documents, confusing in its complexity and bewildering in its extent. Nevertheless, many a reader will have some guide to its content through Scripture teaching in school or instruction in Church, and can give some account of the general history of the Hebrews, at any rate to the end of II Kings (561 B.C.). However, few of the Old Testament books as we now have them are contemporary with the events they record, and the Old Testament itself, in its present form, came gradually into being in the centuries following that date.

The Jews have been called 'the People of the Book'. Their sacred Scriptures controlled and directed their religious and civil life. The many books of the Old Testament were divided into three categories: *Law*, *Prophets*, and *Writings*. Of these the Law and the Prophets, as vehicles of the divine Word, were pre-eminent in authority (cf. Matt. 5: 17). The Law had special significance (the Hebrew word is *Torah*, and would be more correctly translated instruction), as traditionally handed down by divine revelation at Sinai to Moses, the

great Law-giver. In fact, like the codified law of other civilized nations, the Jewish *Torah* was the result of growth over many centuries, and reached its present form about 300 B.C.

By associating the *Torah* as a whole with the events at Sinai the Jews invested it with absolute authority; it was believed to be no man-made law, but the divine Word expressing the divine Will for the nation, unchangeable as God himself is unchangeable. This attitude to the Law underlies much of the conflict in the Gospels between the Jewish religious authorities and Jesus of Nazareth, as when he appeared by his acts to break or to condone the breaking of the Sabbath. The implication of his attitude, as the Jews saw it, was either that he was a Law-breaker, or that he claimed an authority superior to the divine Law.

These Jewish Scriptures, in all their categories, were considered to yield 'instruction' for the careful and pious reader. They constituted the major part of the curriculum in the synagogue schools such as Jesus attended, much as the *Qur'ān* is the main textbook for Muslim boys educated upon traditional lines. Learning the Scriptures by heart was the usual method of teaching, though Jesus could also read (Luke 4: 16) and write (John 8: 8). His knowledge of the Old Testament was extensive, deep, and fruitful. In controversy with his contemporaries, this young Rabbi outclassed his

## WHAT DID JESUS ASSUME?

opponents, not only in his knowledge of his people's sacred Scriptures, but in the spiritual profundity of his interpretation of them.

Reviewing the Old Testament as a whole, and using it as the record of the myths, traditions, laws, and historical events which enshrined their religious history from the earliest days, can we see clearly what the Jews believed? In a brief chapter it is impossible to do more than select points of interest which relate to the main subject of this book. It will be best to arrange the material around two crucial aspects of their belief.

First, the Jewish religion of Jesus' day is technically described as *ethical monotheism*: monotheism because worship of one God, to the exclusion of the worship of other gods (i.e. monolatry), led gradually to the belief that this one God, Yahweh,\* was the sole creator and sustainer of mankind; and ethical because Yahweh was believed to be righteous, and to require righteousness of his people.

Jewish religion is monotheistic. It must be admitted, however, that the explicit statement of this

\* This was the name of God in the Old Testament, so far as modern scholarship can discern it. The more common Jehovah is due to a misunderstanding of the Hebrew text, which was written without vowels. The consonants YHWH represented the name of God, but the pious Hebrew would not pronounce this name; he read YHWH and pronounced 'adhonay (my Lord). A later combination of the consonants YHWH with the vowels of 'adhonay produced 'Jehovah', which is certainly not what the Hebrew would have read.

belief appears only in later writings. For a long period Israel seems to have regarded their God, Yahweh, as a national deity, in much the same way as the Assyrians or Babylonians worshipped their national gods. Also, at certain periods, as in the reign of Manasseh (II Kings 21), they appear to have worshipped other gods side by side with Yahweh. None the less, though over long periods Israel's religious outlook was similar to that of other nations, there is reason to think that the central core of Jewish belief held at least the germ of monotheism.

The earliest stories speak of Yahweh as calling Abraham's father from Ur of the Chaldees, as appearing to Moses in Midian, as delivering Israel from Egypt, and settling them in the Promised Land. The prophets consistently represent Yahweh as bringing judgement upon surrounding nations. Isaiah of Jerusalem declared that Yahweh used the heathen Assyria to chastise his people, and the second Isaiah proclaimed the equally heathen Cyrus as their deliverer. Yahweh is compared with the gods of surrounding nations only to bring out the wider scope of his authority, and the holiness of his nature. The basic faith of the Hebrews, if we discount the popular idolatries and the superstitions, and the religious practices forced on rulers by foreign alliances or through political subjection, seems ever to have been in a Yahweh who is



plainly declared to be the sole God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, the Saviour of all mankind (Isa. 45: 5, 18, 22).

The monotheistic tendency of Old Testament belief is further indicated by the emphasis placed on the evil of apostasy (i.e. abandoning this religious principle); 'to go a-whoring after other gods' ('adultery' in the Old Testament being a common metaphor for 'apostasy') is the supreme sin. Thus their first commandment (Exod. 20: 2, 3; Deut. 6: 4). However limited in their view of Yahweh the early Hebrews might have been, the demand for loyal obedience to him was unlimited. There was no age of tolerance, and their prophets and teachers forbade every form of false religious worship. Much of their literature has been so edited as to enshrine the moral consequences of this attitude. Thus the book of Judges presents the stories and legends of the ancient heroes and deliverers in a framework intended to teach that as long as Israel remained faithful to Yahweh he defended and delivered them, but that faithlessness was immediately followed by national disaster. The same theme runs through Samuel and Kings, where monarchs are judged in the light of their attitude to the religious syncretism which was a feature of the time.

It is most significant of the Hebrew Prophets that they expounded this demand for unlimited obedience to Yahweh in ethical terms. Yahweh, they

declared, is holy in his nature and righteous in his acts. The experiences of their history were interpreted in the light of their belief, and the doctrine that righteousness reaps reward and unrighteousness results in suffering was written into their literature. The Prophets demand straightness of dealing between man and man, and in the life of the nation. Apostasy is to be interpreted not merely in ritual, but also in ethical terms: to worship Yahweh out of a false life is as much apostasy as to turn to other gods. This somewhat new and searching requirement of prophetic religion is summed up in the words of Micah: 'He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth Yahweh require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' (Mic. 6: 8).

This brief exposition of Jewish ethical monotheism must suffice; it can be summarized in the statement, 'Yahweh is One, and Yahweh is righteous.' It is necessary to emphasize, however, that Yahweh's righteousness is more than a divine attribute: it is seen in his acts and reflected in his requirements of his people. It is Yahweh's purpose to spread righteousness of his kind in the earth. For this reason the righteous Yahweh is also a Saviour, since he seeks to impart to man and his society this righteousness.

The second point to be emphasized is the Jewish belief that they were the Chosen people, the Elect



nation. The full significance of this belief is revealed by a study of their history and thought. That the Jews as a people often seriously misunderstood the implications of this belief is only to be expected; all too often it was assumed that election meant privilege, in the sense that they stood in favour with Yahweh, and however heavily he might punish other nations, he would not so punish them. The attitude appears in New Testament times; John the Baptizer warned his hearers that in the Day of Wrath it would not avail them to plead, 'We have Abraham to our father' (Luke 3 : 8, and see John 8 : 13-59), just as long ago Amos had uttered words from Yahweh to his people on the same subject (Amos 3 : 1 f.). Election was indeed a privilege, but one that made the utmost demands on those whom Yahweh had chosen; election was for service. Yahweh had chosen Israel as the instrument of his self-revelation to the world.

This sense of election to a special divine destiny runs throughout the Old Testament. It appears in the earliest stories. Abraham was called by Yahweh (Gen. 12 : 1-3); Isaac was born, as by a miracle, to the aged Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17 : 17); Jacob, though the younger, was preferred and chosen, as against his elder brother Esau (Gen. 27); and of Jacob came the twelve tribes. The history then relates how these tribes were enslaved in Egypt, but how God raised up a special servant in Moses, to

whom he appeared in the land of Midian, and through whom he miraculously delivered a slave people from the hands of a powerful Pharaoh. Then, leading them by pillars of fire and of cloud, Yahweh brought these people first to Sinai, where he gave them his Law, and then to Palestine, where he gave them a land to dwell in. Jewish interpretation of the religious significance of these early events wove the pattern of their thought about the relation between Yahweh and themselves throughout the subsequent centuries of their history.

Israel's election, then, was understood to bear relation to Yahweh's purpose for all mankind. They were an instrument in His hand, a vehicle of the divine revelation and salvation. This belief is nowhere expressed more deeply than in the poems known as the *Servant Songs* (Isa. 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13 to 53: 12). In these poems the writer, who certainly had Israel in mind, speaks of Yahweh's servant suffering for many, and bringing forth true religion to the heathen nations. To adapt, somewhat daringly, a significant sentence from St Paul, 'God was in Israel, reconciling the world unto himself.' Certainly this is what, to the writer of the *Servant Songs*, the doctrine of election implied.

Yet this was the expectation rather than the realization; for Israel, called to this high destiny, proved an unworthy instrument in her Maker's

hands. Herein lies the tragedy of the Old Testament; its bold affirmations find no completion or fulfilment. Elected to be Yahweh's servant, Israel at no point proved fit to fulfil this task. This is the burden of those prophets whose gloomy forecasts of chastisement and doom are only intermittently lightened by words of hope; and even these are all too often the interpolations of a later age.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's hope rests in Yahweh, not in herself; there is a sense of tragic failure which can be redeemed only by some further mighty act of God. If the purpose of Israel's election is to find fulfilment, it must be through some special work of Yahweh. Thus the belief grew that Yahweh, in his own time, would send his Messiah, through whom his reign in righteousness would be established, Israel be saved, and the nations brought to true belief. So far as the Jewish nation is concerned, this hope remains to the present day. But it is the claim of New Testament writers that the unfulfilled hopes of the Old Testament are realized in the New Age inaugurated through God's Son and Servant, Jesus of Nazareth, whose claim to be the Messiah the Jews rejected.

Against this brief sketch of the religious background provided by the Old Testament we have now to ask what Jesus was able to assume in his hearers. Jesus attempted no proof of God's existence. In common with his people, it would have

appeared strange and senseless to him that anyone should deny the fact of God. Only the fool, that is, one corrupt at heart and insensitive to religious and moral truth, would say there is no God (Ps. 14: 1). However, more important is what the Jews believed about God.

First, they believed God to be the creator of all that is, and the sustainer of the universe he had created. In the beginning, God's spirit had brought order out of chaos, and the heavens, the earth, and all in it, and man had been created. The world of Nature is the scene of man's life and endeavour.

Secondly, they believed that God's mercy is over all his works. That which he has created is precious in his sight. Man therefore lives under the eternal providence, whose care and concern can be traced in history and human experience. This thought is stressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: God feeds the birds of the air, and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6: 26, 29-30); he sends his rain and sunshine upon all alike (Matt. 5: 45); even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matt. 10: 30). Man lives in God's world, and God presides over his creation.

It is necessary, however, to go deeper than this. Just because the world is God's, his rule and authority are to be discerned within it. God is to be known, not only in his creation and providence, but in his kingship. This brings us to the third



Jewish belief about God, and one that requires extensive treatment.

To speak of God as King is to use a human institution, kingship, to explain one aspect of God's relationship to his world, and by so doing to express this as a relationship that affects persons. A king rules over a kingdom, and has subjects; a king issues commands which his subjects must obey, or be punished. The Jews understood God's Kingship in some such sense as this. God is King in his own creation. This concept, however, was associated with that of themselves as the Chosen people of God. Thus, at least over a long period and in many of the Old Testament writers, God's Kingship is expressed in national terms. He is, in a peculiar sense, Israel's sovereign Lord, because he has chosen and called Israel to be his people and expressed his sovereignty through them.

Only gradually and occasionally does this nationalistic concept of Yahweh's sovereignty give way, especially in the works of the writing prophets, to the idea of him as 'the true God . . . the living God, and an everlasting King: at his wrath the earth trembleth, and the nations are not able to abide his indignation' (Jer. 10: 10). Furthermore, there were seers who perceived that it was God's purpose to use Israel as the medium of his self-revelation to surrounding nations; Israel had been called to fulfil her mission as 'a light to lighten the

Gentiles' (Isa. 2: 6; Luke 2: 32). This thought, however, while present in the Old Testament, is overlaid for the most part by a more nationalist understanding of God's dealings with Israel, and is not wholly freed from its typically Jewish setting until through Jesus Christ, and in the faith and understanding of the early Church, God is proclaimed King of all, Jew and Gentile alike.

To apply the concept of Kingship to God is, of course, to use a metaphor, one which finds frequent expression in the Gospels as the Kingdom of God. But a metaphor may be misleading unless a statement of its limits accompanies it, and it must therefore be explained that, in the Old Testament and New Testament, the concept stresses God's sovereignty or rule. In the sphere of human activity and endeavour, the divine sovereignty is interpreted in terms of God's demands upon men and the obedience which is his due. This is plainly taught in the Gospels, where the Kingdom of God means substantially the rule of God. Here, however, this concept of God's rule is freed from the ancient Jewish nationalistic beliefs, and in so far as God rules a Kingdom it is comprised of those who, whatever their nationality, respond in obedience to the divine requirements. In the Old Testament the expectation remains to the end that Israel, as the elect people, is destined to be at least the nucleus of God's Kingdom, as this is seen among men.

This exposition involves a strange contradiction, for it makes the astonishing claim that God is King in a world of disobedient men. A full understanding of Christianity is not possible unless this contradiction is appreciated and penetrated. To claim that God is King, the Creator, exercising a sovereign providence over the world and man, should logically lead to a determinist (or fatalistic) theology, and in many Biblical utterances appears to do so (Rom. 9-11 is an outstanding example of this). But the apparent determinism of many Jewish writings was superficial, since it was tempered by other more fundamental concepts. The Divine sovereign providence was interpreted along personal lines, and while these writers held tenaciously to their belief in the sovereignty of Yahweh, they held equally firmly to a belief in man's essential freedom. Man could, and did, disobey the divine command, and on this account was responsible for his sin before God. In short, the sovereign Yahweh ruled disobedient subjects.

This belief in God's sovereignty and the experience of man's freedom to disobey resulted in a tension which troubled the Jews greatly in the later centuries of their history. Man disobeys his King, and the result is an imperfect world. Explanation of man's disobedience found expression in the myth of the first parents, created perfect, but learning disobedience (Gen. 3). By this disobedience, an

evil principle had entered into the heart of man; rebellion had eaten into man's heart like a foul disease. In their own historical record, the Jews wrote themselves down as a sinful race, ever seeking and worshipping false gods, ever failing in obedience to their eternal King; and they attributed their disasters and punishments to this waywardness. Nevertheless, however well it expressed their own belief about man in his relationship to God, this statement of the situation was intolerable, and some remedy was called for. Thus, the cry of their hearts is 'O Lord, how long?' If indeed, as they truly believed, God is King, then surely God must resolve this conflict between God's rule and man's disobedience. The King of all the earth must take his power and reign.

Thus there grew a Jewish belief in God's Day, or God's hour. It became an article of their faith that at some time, known only to God, he would visit the earth in judgement and set up his Kingdom, using as his instrument his Messiah. The title Messiah means simply 'anointed one', and its Old Testament background may be briefly indicated. Kings were anointed at their coronation, and became thereby 'the Lord's anointed'; so were priests at their consecration. A heathen King, Cyrus, is described as Yahweh's Messiah, because Yahweh carries out his purpose of releasing his exiled people through him (Isa. 54: 1). After the restoration of



the Jewish people from exile in the sixth century B.C., the governor of Judaea, Zerubbabel, is proclaimed the expected Messiah (Hag. 2: 23; Zech. 6: 11).

The idea varies in its use, but always the prospect of the 'anointed one' carrying out Yahweh's purpose for his people is present. Before the Exile (the deportation of Jews to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.), hope concentrated on the expectation of another King, as strong and good as David, who would restore the nation and lead it back to God. After the Exile, the idea turned more and more towards a Messiah sent from heaven, God's deliverer and vice-regent, who would rule the world in the day of God's Kingdom, when evil would be banished, evil-doers destroyed, and the righteous would reign with the Messiah for ever.

This sovereign King was also Israel's righteous Lord. God was known in a gracious personal relationship as a righteous deity. Amos, in a vision, saw God with a plumb-line in his hand (Amos 7: 7-9): 'then said the Lord, Behold I will set a plumb-line in the midst of my people.' This is a weighted string used by the mason to test the vertical straightness of his wall. Thus the figure represents God testing his people for 'straightness', an excellent image for the purpose. This belief runs throughout the Old Testament. God is not remote,

unconcerned with man's life and ways; man is not left without divine guidance as he frames the rules of this life. There is a divine requirement, a righteousness of God, according to which man in society is judged.

This doctrine of the righteous judgement of God is something more than a statement that man fails to live up to the best that he knows, true as this may be; it is the doctrine that the true pattern for man and society arises out of the nature of God himself. Men must be righteous because God is righteous, and with the same kind of righteousness; and it is the purpose of God to implant his righteousness on the earth. 'Seek ye good and not evil, that ye may live . . . hate evil and love the good, and establish judgement in the gate . . . let judgement roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream' (Amos 5: 14, 15, 24).

God, therefore, was seen as Creator, merciful towards his creatures, and ruling over them as a righteous King. A fourth point may be briefly mentioned. It has been said that the Jews held themselves to have been specially chosen by God, and their deepest thinkers believed the purpose of this election was that they might receive his revelation, show forth the true life of faith, and pass on to the world divine truth. In relation to this belief, two concepts, familiar to Old Testament students, and of immense importance in our understanding

of the New Testament, need further mention. These are the idea of Covenant, and the concept of the Servant.

It was established Jewish teaching that when Yahweh chose Abraham, and again at Sinai, he entered into a covenant with his people (see Gen. 17; Exod. 19: 5; Jer. 31: 32). What needs to be said here is that this covenant was not so much a legal contract as a moral and spiritual bond between God and his people. 'If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples; for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation' (Exod. 19: 5).

In the Gospels this concept of a covenant as expressing the true relationship between God and his people was used fruitfully by Jesus at the Last Supper, and gathered meaning when the early Church believed itself to be the New Israel, under a New Covenant. This Covenant was new because it was remade on a sounder spiritual basis; the ancient idea, that of God and his people in a relation of holiness, is present in a heightened form. It was new, also, in the sense that the New Israel was a supra-national community: the New Covenant was made available through the Church to all mankind.

The concept of the 'Servant' has already been

touched upon, but it must be mentioned again because Jesus made extensive use of it, and New Testament thought cannot be interpreted without it. The four poems in Isaiah have been subjected to much discussion, and cannot be fully expounded here. It is certain that in some sense the writer had Israel in mind (cf. Isa. 49: 3). The central thought of the poems is of God's purpose for the nation and for mankind achieved through the suffering of the Servant. The nations who look upon the Servant's sufferings make this witness: 'Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace is upon him, and with his stripes we are healed . . . the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.' The poet who, meditating upon Israel's history and sufferings, and upon God's purpose for mankind through his chosen people, achieved this insight into the redemptive nature of God's work and purpose, drew very near to the New Testament experience.

Briefly, then, to sum up what has been said in this chapter, Jesus of Nazareth was brought up among and ministered to a people schooled and disciplined through a long period of history in their understanding of God and his relationship to man. The records of their historical and religious experience had been written down, available to every



## WHAT DID JESUS ASSUME?

Jew for the guidance of his life and thought, and open to those who could read, study, and meditate. As he entered upon his ministry, Jesus could therefore assume in his Jewish hearers all that this long historical and religious experience had taught them. That God was One, the only Creator and sustainer of the Universe, they knew; and they needed not to be taught again. More important still, they knew God as the sovereign, just, and righteous Lord who had entered into a covenant with his people and disciplined them in the divine way of life. God, they perceived, speaks to men in and through man, making known his revelation of justice and mercy through history and life's experiences.

This they knew; yet this knowledge was not enough. In the Old Testament there is an ever-present sense of incompleteness. God is the sovereign and righteous Lord, but his sovereignty is not fully manifest. Man's disobedience and sin remain. God wills to save his people, but the day of his salvation tarries. In the Messiah he will, in his own good time, reign; in his Servant he will bring forth true religion among all the nations. The final note is one of expectancy, as holy men and seers search for the signs of the Saviour.



## CHAPTER 3

### *Jesus and the People Who Knew Him*

By the close of the first century A.D. and within seventy years of the Crucifixion, the four Gospels had been written. The latest of them is probably the fourth, traditionally supposed to be from the pen of *John*, son of Zebedee, but more likely to have come to us through a certain John the Elder, possibly towards the close of the first century A.D. The earliest Gospel, dated about A.D. 65, is by that *John Mark* who accompanied Paul on part of his first missionary journey, and who is said by Papias (A.D. 125) to have become an interpreter to Peter. The other two Gospels, the first by an unknown writer, but possibly incorporating material from *Matthew* the disciple, and the third by Paul's travel-companion *Luke*, are dated around A.D. 80-85.

Thus it would appear that of the four Gospels transmitted to us none is written by an eye-witness, though it may reasonably be held that John, son of Zebedee, Peter, Matthew, and Paul stand in close relation to the authors. In compiling their Gospels, Luke and the author of Matthew used, besides their own material, the Gospel of Mark, and a source earlier than that (known as 'Q'). On account of

their similarity of viewpoint the first three Gospels are known as the *Synoptic Gospels*. The Fourth Gospel is an independent work, interpretative in style and intention.

Space cannot be devoted to discussion of the searching literary and historical criticism to which these Gospels have been subjected in the last half century or more. It must suffice to say that no literature has received greater attention from critics and scholars, and none has stood the test better. The date and the manner of their compilation, the sources on which they draw, the history of their transmission, and the object for which they were written can be studied in modern handbooks.

Two points must, however, be noted. First that the Gospels arose out of the faith of the Church in Jesus of Nazareth. As Paul might have said, they were written 'from faith to faith'; that is, they were a careful record of relevant facts about the birth, ministry, death, and exaltation of Jesus, as these had been received through those who believed in him, and the purpose of the record was to create faith in this same Jesus (John 20: 31, and cf. the opening statement of Mark 1: 1). Secondly it must be held in mind that while the Gospels contain biographical and historical data, they are neither biography nor history. Interpretation and selection has been used in the production of documents which, written as 'rolls', must perforce be

limited in length, and in any case were to be used as manuals of instruction and propaganda pamphlets rather than historical biographies.

Does this mean that the Gospels are not to be trusted? The answer will depend on the attitude of the reader. One who is already certain in his mind that the claims the Gospels make about Jesus Christ are false may well find the record unconvincing. Those of more open mind must at least ask whether, even if inaccuracies may be detected and if certain stories carry the appearance of legend, the overall impression is not inherently sincere and consistent. The experiences and traditions on which the Gospels are based were shared by a large number of people at first hand, and their conviction – a conviction which reappears in all parts of the world whenever the Gospels are read – is worthy of investigation. But inasmuch as it is a conviction personal to the reader, and is not logical proof, the matter rests between the reader and what he reads. If the claim their writers make for them is valid these records, springing out of faith, will create faith.

That Jesus of Nazareth lived (his probable dates were about 6 B.C. to A.D. 29), no sincere historian has ever doubted. The Gospels bear witness to the impact he made upon his own generation and the generations immediately following; and the purpose of this chapter is to analyse just what this im-

pact was. One thing stands out clearly: whether Jesus was or was not all his intimates claimed him to be, certain it is that he stirred men deeply. None could be indifferent to him; all were moved to react, towards him or against him. The religious authorities of his day considered him so dangerous that they speedily had him crucified, yet in the final scene of the Gospels his disciples made the seemingly extravagant claim that he had risen from the dead, appeared to his followers, and restored their faith and confidence. Evidently whatever conclusions we ourselves may arrive at, this Jesus of Nazareth was no ordinary man. Concerning him men could, and did, hold different views; what they could not do was to dismiss him as a person of no consequence. Face to face with him a decision, one way or the other, became inevitable.

A careful analysis of the movement of events in Mark (and so far as possible this, the earliest Gospel, will be used to supply the material of this chapter) results in a convincing sequence. In the northern territory of Galilee a young and gifted teacher, with power to heal, made his appearance. Crowds flocked to him with expectancy. The stage seems already to have been set for his appearance through the work of John the Baptizer, a prophet in the ancient tradition who had consciously adopted the dress and manner of Elijah (Matt. 3: 4; cf. Mal. 3: 4), and proclaimed the coming of the Day of the



Lord in the person of one mightier than himself. Jesus' own ministry began with a public baptism by John, which identified him with the Baptizer's work, and with a period of retreat in the wilderness (Mark 1: 9-13), before he publicly proclaimed 'the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1: 14).

The religious authorities of the capital heard of Jesus and his success, and came down to investigate. What they found did not please them; the young Rabbi was popular, unconventional in his methods, authoritative in his teaching, and critical of tradition. An atmosphere of religious enthusiasm and expectancy was being created which shocked and alarmed conservative religionists. In fear and anger the religious leaders sought to discredit Jesus, and when this move failed they took steps to destroy him. He on his part, finding that the enthusiasm of the multitude shackled him and misrepresented his purpose, and perceiving that he had little time in which to make a lasting impression, drew away from the crowds and concentrated his attention on a select inner circle of disciples who were able to apprehend his message and penetrate the quality of his life and person. For a period, while he taught and prepared his little band of followers, he evaded the rapidly closing net, but when he was ready he went to Jerusalem, challenged the authorities, and was arrested and tried before his own countrymen on a charge of blasphemy.



## JESUS AND THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

Such is Mark's record in outline of the march of events, at any rate as far as the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus. It was, however, the claim of that inner circle of disciples that the authorities who had Jesus judicially murdered did not succeed in killing him, or the movement he had initiated, but rather that he was raised from the dead as the living Lord of the spiritual revolution he had begun. Among the many others who knew Jesus less intimately we may discern five typical reactions.

First, we observe that *many were deeply moved to follow Jesus with enthusiasm*. The opening chapters of Mark reflect this impact of his early teaching and healing ministry. People flocked to him from distant places (3 : 7 f.); crowds were so dense that Jesus used a boat anchored a few yards from the lakeside as a platform from which to speak (3 : 9); often he found it necessary to avoid the towns (1 : 45); leisure to eat, even to pray, was hard to come by (1 : 35; 3 : 20; 6 : 31, 46). News of his miracles set the countryside ablaze with rumour, and raised expectations among pious men who, nurtured in their Scriptures, looked for the coming of God's prophet. Thus they came in large numbers, men and women of all kinds. They saw; they heard. What did they see and hear? One illustration must suffice, taken from Mark's description of the scene in a synagogue one Sabbath day. The passage is worth quoting :

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

*And straightway there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And the unclean spirit, tearing and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? a new teaching! with authority he commandeth even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And the report of him went out straightway everywhere into all the region of Galilee round about. (Mark 1: 23-8).*

What report went out? What had impressed them? Mark records a miracle, the exorcism of a demon. The demoniac, in the presence of Jesus, proclaimed him 'The Holy One of God'. The crowd commented, 'What is this? a new teaching! with authority he commandeth even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' The emphasis is on Jesus' *authority*. We today might wish to distinguish miracle from teaching; Mark does not do so. He indicates that the miracle was the teaching, or rather, that what we call miracle and teaching were both expressions of the manifest authority of Jesus. He taught with authority, and not as the scribes (whose exposition consisted of quoting authorities); the unclean spirits obeyed him (Mark 1: 22,

27). Other stories claim that Jesus' power enabled him to control nature and to raise a child from death (Mark 4: 33-41; 5: 21-4, 35-43).

It is useless for us to say we do not understand such accounts; there is no evidence that Mark did either. Nor does it meet the point to suggest that many such stories are exaggerated legends which have grown around Jesus, for whether they be legends or not, those who knew Jesus at first hand experienced no difficulty in attributing such miracles to him. They knew him; they had experienced an authority which revealed itself in his every word, look, and gesture. They did not believe in Jesus because of his miracles, but in the miracles because they knew Jesus. The miracles, as Mark suggests, were evidence of the power behind them.

The recognition of this authority led some 'to leave all and follow him' (Mark 1: 16-20; 2: 14). The enthusiasm of the early Galilean ministry gave way, in time, to the personal enthusiasm of the small group which clung to him and became his disciples. Doubtless many in the crowds were impressed and helped by Jesus; but a large proportion would light-heartedly come and go. What remained was the band of faithful and devoted men and women, of whom a small group became his constant intimates, whose enthusiasm developed into personal loyalty.

If many followed him with enthusiasm, there was

*a second group which opposed him in anger.* Mark states that the opposition came principally from the ruling class and the religious leaders; he believes that 'the common people heard him gladly' right to the end (12: 37). This is probably true, though in any case if some of the common people turned against Jesus we should be unlikely to hear of them. Among the ruling class we hear of men of the calibre of Joseph of Arimathaea (15: 43) who were secret disciples. But in general the ruling and religious authorities opposed Jesus.

What led them to this attitude? What raised their anger? The early chapters of Mark give us guidance. Jesus was denounced for taking his meals with publicans and sinners (2: 16); he was accused of blasphemy for claiming to forgive sins (2: 7); he was held to break the Mosaic Law in his use of the Sabbath (2: 23-8; 3: 1-6). These instances will suffice, for they shrewdly draw out important points of conflict.

Jesus was unconventional; he had no respect for persons. He was prepared to dine with a Pharisee, and to eat with publicans and sinners; or, to put this in the terminology we are likely to understand, he was prepared to dine with a Church leader, and to eat with the heathen. Conventional religion teaches us to associate with good men and not to make friends with bad men; Jesus was the friend of all. He 'showed a profound respect for



## JESUS AND THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

any man or woman . . . his sense of the infinite worth of a human soul was apparent especially in his dealings with those whom public opinion discredited, or hated, or found repulsive – customs officers, harlots, lepers, Samaritans.’\*

His opponents claimed that Jesus did not respect traditional religion, that he broke the Law. The fourth commandment of Moses was held in such respect by the Jews that ‘Sabbath-day observance’ had become an obsession. The extent to which this was the case is illustrated by the charge made against the disciples who plucked ears of corn as they walked through the cornfields. They were accused of desecrating the Sabbath by working. What work were they doing? They had pulled ears of corn (reaping) and rubbed off the husks between the palms of their hands (milling)! They had thus broken the Law which says ‘Thou shalt do no manner of work’, and proved themselves unholy before God.

Jesus was unable to respect this kind of religious attitude and requirement. Throughout his ministry he emphasized the *spirit* of the Mosaic Law. Thus, the Temple was pre-eminently ‘a house of prayer’ (11: 17). Here then was a source of violent conflict. Religious leaders and conservative upholders of traditional religion were displeased and angered by this apparently carefree handling of their

\* Gore, *Jesus of Nazareth*. p. 62f.



cherished beliefs. By what right, by what authority, did Jesus set himself up to criticize and reinterpret Mosaic ordinances?

Then there was his claim to forgive sins. This was, of course, monstrous in the eyes of his opponents, for by it he assumed for himself an authority which belongs to God alone. Repeatedly this question of his *authority* crops up, an authority which his followers recognized, an authority which his opponents rejected in anger and hatred.

A third group can be distinguished, *those who were moved to explain him away in fear*. Probably to a large extent this group overlapped with the second, the rulers who saw their position threatened and the whole fabric of the religious and social life endangered by the impact of Jesus upon their thought and life. Certain it is that some sought to dispose of Jesus by explaining him away. They said, 'He is beside himself' (Mark 3 : 21), 'He hath Beelzebub' (3 : 22): that is to say, he is mad, the agent of demonic power. Mark's account suggests that even some of his family were anxious about Jesus on this ground.

Now the charge is interesting, for whatever may be our opinion concerning the claims Jesus made for himself, or the claims others made about him, no student of the Gospels can reasonably hold that Jesus was mad. He was eminently a sane, reasonable person, as his reply to those who brought the

charges shows (Mark 3 : 23-5). He disliked every kind of disorder and confusion, physical or emotional; it is patent that wherever he appeared disorder and confusion fled before him. Disordered minds quietened and became sane, crowds were stilled to listen or organized to be fed, the panic-stricken disciples gained confidence and peace. In fact, the miracle of the stilling of the storm on the lake mirrors the influence Jesus always appears to have had on his environment.

The more strange then that so palpably false a charge should have been made against him, that so flimsy an argument should have been used to explain him away. The reason for it must lie, not in Jesus, but in his opponents. Forced to acknowledge that Jesus possessed a power and personal authority which marked him off from other men, they explained him away by classing him with the demented and demon-possessed. He was possessed, they argued, not by the Holy Spirit, but by an unholy spirit. If this position could be established, then his commanding influence over the public mind would be destroyed, his mighty works and personal authority would be explained away. Then Jesus could be forcibly restrained without danger from public sympathy.

Jesus' reply to this attempt to discredit him helps to substantiate the belief that it was fear of him that caused his opponents to make the charge. Jesus

accused them of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3 : 28-30); that is to say he accused them of a conscious, hard-hearted resistance to truth. This attitude of mind and spirit had no forgiveness, because it admitted of no repentance. In the interests of their own position, they were prepared to call good evil. Only men whose minds were dominated by fear would seek by accusations to explain Jesus away.

The religious authorities might be angry with Jesus, and some from fear might seek to explain him away; but this left Jesus free to influence his intimates and continue a public ministry. Drastic measures were contemplated, and *some were moved to destroy him utterly*. What else could be done? Angry remonstrance availed nothing: men did but point to the mighty works or smile shyly as learned Rabbis were worsted in discussion. Useless to claim Jesus to be a Law-breaker, for he was manifestly learned in the Law and expounded it with a spiritual authority that carried its own stamp of truth and revealed the hollowness of much traditional interpretation. Ridiculous to call him mad, for it left the impression that his accusers were men of distorted mind. What could they do about him? If he was permitted to flourish, their authority must dwindle, and traditional religion must suffer the upheaval of spiritual reformation. Only one way was left to them to silence him: he must die.

## JESUS AND THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

Mark states that this decision was inherent in the situation from the beginning (3 : 6), that Jesus knew speedy death was inevitable (8 : 31 ; 9 : 31 ; 10 : 33). The conflict between him and the religious authorities could be resolved only by the destruction of the one for the sake of the other (John 11 : 49 f.).

Once the decision to destroy Jesus had been taken, the machinations of the authorities swiftly accomplished the rest. They had two concerns, that the arrest should be swift and secret, lest there be a rising of the people in sympathy with Jesus, and that the charge against him should gain a sentence of death. Plans were accordingly laid. The arrest was arranged for the late evening, and Judas Iscariot was secured to lead them direct to Jesus' retreat and identify the prisoner. Such precautions were necessary in Jerusalem at Passover-tide, for thousands of pilgrims had flocked into the city, many of them from Galilee, and Jesus was popular (Mark 9 : 9 f., and John 12 : 19).

The exact sequence of events, once the arrest had been made, is uncertain. A preliminary hearing of the case seems to have taken place at the house of the former High Priest, Annas (John 18 : 13). This was followed, as soon as possible, by the trial proper before as many of the Sanhedrin as could be called together (Luke 22 : 66) ; this investigation of the case may have been made while it was still night. The charge before this native court was



*blasphemy* (Mark 14: 64), that is claiming divine authority and prerogatives. The penalty in Jewish law for this was death. Jesus was found guilty of the charge, but as the Jews had no authority under the Romans to carry out the death penalty, the case now passed to Pilate's jurisdiction. Here the charge was not blasphemy, which would not have constituted a capital charge in Roman eyes, but *sedition* (Mark 15: 2, but fully set out in Luke 23: 2 as 'perverting the nation', i.e. sedition in general, forbidding tribute to Caesar, and proclaiming himself a king). Pilate, with the gravest doubts and misgiving, permitted the charge to stand, and condemned Jesus to death.

Thus the Jewish authorities accomplished their will. The methods they used, the speed with which they carried through the arrest and trials and moved the occupying authorities to action, prove their nervousness and anxiety in the whole affair. Jesus was arrested after supper; by 9 a.m. next day he was on the cross (Mark 15: 25). While pilgrim-filled Jerusalem slept, and the disciples hid away, Jesus of Nazareth was speedily liquidated, and the dangerous movement of which he was the origin and the inspiration was destroyed. So, at least, the authorities thought.

Events did not turn out, however, as the Jewish leaders expected. Instead of being the end of the movement Jesus originated, his death proved but



the beginning of a new phase of his influence. Jerusalem, calm for a moment after the events of Passover-eve, began to seethe with fresh rumours and claims. The inner circle of disciples, scattered by the arrest of their leader, began once again to meet together and to put on a bold front. Jesus, they claimed, had risen from death, to inspire and empower anew the movement he had initiated during his ministry.

For an account of this experience as it has been handed down to us, Mark must be abandoned. This Gospel was mutilated in transmission, and though later editors added a shorter and a longer ending, it finishes abruptly at verse 8 of chapter 16, with the words 'for they were afraid (of)'. What remains to us of the original Gospel tells of the women's visit to the sepulchre to carry out customary funeral rites, their surprise at finding the tomb open, and their meeting with a young man who informed them that Jesus was risen and would meet the disciples in Galilee. For further material we are forced to turn to the other Gospels. The accounts vary, and in certain small particulars contradict one another, as we would expect the narration of the same event by a number of different people to do; but the main lines of the witness are consistent. Jesus made his appearance to his disciples in risen form. The authorities who had contrived his death had been left with an empty tomb,

and the young Rabbi whom, out of their anger and fear, they had supposedly destroyed was in their midst in a form no earthly power could vanquish. Thus the Gospels close, not with a promising movement destroyed, but with a group of *men and women who were moved to worship Jesus unreservedly*.

The classical expression of this attitude to Jesus is the story of Thomas the disciple in the Fourth Gospel (John 20: 24-9). It is worth observing that in all the accounts, far from accepting readily or uncritically the claim that Jesus had risen from death, the disciples at first frankly disbelieved that any such thing could have occurred. Mary Magdalene, on finding the tomb empty, jumped to the obvious conclusion: someone had stolen or moved the body (John 20: 2). Her report sent Peter and a second disciple running to the tomb, only to confirm what Mary had said (20: 8 f.). Again, Mary, face to face with the risen Jesus, mistook him for the gardener (20: 15), and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked several miles with Jesus and did not penetrate his identity (Luke 24: 16).

Christianity's opponents have argued that many of the disciples were the victims of a hallucination. This cannot be true, for it requires that they entertained this hallucination against their immediate convictions. Far from being credulous, the disciples were at first sceptical, and none more so than Thomas. 'Except I see in his hands the print of the

nails . . . I will not believe' (John 20: 25). Thomas required proof, incontrovertible proof, not only that such a visitation as the disciples described was possible, but that this appearance was indeed the Jesus whom men had crucified. Yet, seemingly in a moment, he is converted. In an experience of Jesus he abandons his scepticism, and his demand for visible proofs. In the accents of the later Church he proclaims Jesus 'My Lord and my God'.

Here then the account given by the Gospels ends. Two broad types of people have been depicted: those who followed Jesus with enthusiasm, among them a small band who came to worship him unreservedly; and those who opposed him in anger, or explained him away in fear, among them a section who were prepared to adopt extreme measures and put him to death. The issue between the two types centred in the person of Jesus himself, and concerned his authority.

What was he? Who was he? In his presence men were impelled to utter seemingly extravagant words: 'And (they) glorified God, saying, we never saw it on this fashion' (Mark 3: 12); 'And they were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well' (3: 37); 'God hath visited his people' (Luke 7: 16). Here was someone new, someone vital, through whom men were lifted from the pains and ills and miseries of life into a new sphere of victorious living. His words

and acts put men in touch with a power that only the adjective 'divine' could adequately describe. The demon-possessed, those unhappy minds dwelling on the borders of what men call sanity, unfettered by convention or scepticism, recognized his power and proclaimed him in undisguised terms 'the Holy One of God'. To our way of thinking, the utterances of a madman are worthless, but the Gospel writers thought otherwise. To their mind these victims of demonic power recognized the superior power that flowed through Jesus. Or as we in our tiresome and sophisticated way might say, these mental illnesses which men were powerless to cure yielded to the influence of his compassion. Who then was he, who wielded such authority over men, whether they were demon-possessed or sane?

If we prefer not to listen to the testimony of his disciples and well-wishers, there is still the testimony of his opponents to reckon with. For, whatever else may be said of them, the Scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees paid tribute to Jesus by the very vehemence with which they opposed him. Religious authorities do not seek the death of the weak and innocuous, but those who are a real menace to their position and power. Caiaphas made the issue plain: the contest was real, and either Jesus or they must win it; and for himself he proposed to take steps to see that Jesus was the loser.



## JESUS AND THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

At Jesus' trial, they accused him of blasphemy, of making himself equal with God. This does not mean necessarily that Jesus had made this claim in words, or even that he had thought it. His accusers meant that when he forgave sins Jesus was arrogating to himself what God alone has the right and power to do; that when he put aside the Law of the Sabbath, when, as in the Sermon on the Mount, he proclaimed, 'It was said to them of old time (i.e. in the Law) . . . but *I* say unto you . . .' (Matt. 5: 21 f.), he was making himself equal to the God who had delivered the Law to Moses, and proposing to amend the spiritual application of these Laws. Their concern is summed up in the words of the Fourth Gospel: 'Whom makest thou thyself?' (John 8: 53). 'By what authority doest thou these things?' they ask (Mark 11: 28). His opponents attested Jesus' claim to divine authority, even while they rejected it.

The Gospels, as we said at the beginning, were written 'from faith to faith'. Yet they have given us an understanding of the views of both the supporters and the opponents of Jesus. Central to the issue throughout is the question of the attitude men should adopt to him. Should he be followed, obeyed, revered, worshipped as the Living Lord? Should he be rejected as a blasphemer? Face to face with Jesus, men were impelled to a decision. They were constrained to ask, 'What is the wisdom that

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

is given to this man, and what mean such mighty works done by his hands?' (Mark 6: 2). In quiet retreat with his intimates, Jesus asked them, 'Who do men say that I am? . . . But who say ye that I am?' (Mark 27: 24). The reply and acknowledgement of faith confessed him the divine Lord. 'This is my beloved Son: hear ye him' (9: 7); these words from heaven at what has come to be called the Transfiguration reflected the experience and understanding of those who believed in Jesus and committed themselves to him. The Christian throughout the centuries has shared the same conviction; for central to the Christian faith is an attitude to Jesus that accepts him as the Living Lord.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The First Preaching and Fellowship*

AT the close of the second chapter it was pointed out that the Old Testament ended upon a note of expectancy; holy men and seers searched for the signs of the Saviour who would resolve the tension between divine righteousness and human rebellion. During the two centuries before and the first century after the birth of Christ, Jewish history was marked by a series of occasions when their hopes rose high, only to be dashed to disappointment.

The revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes in 166 B.C. was essentially a struggle for religious freedom. The struggle had an initial and glorious success, and the Temple at Jerusalem, desecrated by Antiochus three years earlier, was rededicated on 25 December 164 B.C. There followed an attempt to gain political freedom from their Seleucid overlords, which continued for another twenty years, until under Simon Maccabaeus, in 142 B.C., a *de facto* freedom from foreign domination was won, and Simon was hailed as God's deliverer (1 Macc.\* 14: 4-15). For

\* 1-II Maccabees are found in the Apocrypha. Between 300 B.C. and 100 B.C., Greek-speaking Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures and a number of other books into Greek. This

*Continued overleaf*

about sixty years the Jews kept their freedom, and then once again were subjected to a foreign power. In 63 B.C. Pompey the Great incorporated Judaea into the Syrian Province of the Roman Empire.

From this time until A.D. 70, while the nation remained gripped in the power of Rome, many of the people, whose tradition and way of life had been shaped in an atmosphere of religious expectancy, pinned their hopes to one or another leader (Messiah) who might set them free. There was a revolt under Judas in Galilee in A.D. 7, and under Theudas, who in A.D. 45 led his followers out to the Jordan with the promise that the miracle of the Red Sea crossing would be repeated. The final revolt under these Zealots in their open enmity with Rome began in A.D. 66 and ended in the complete destruction of Jerusalem. Such was the terrible end to a religious expectancy which was too closely related to national and political aims, and failed to penetrate the spiritual significance of the divine election of a people to be God's Servant. In the whole series of events the pattern can be repeatedly discerned: religious expectancy – fanatical revolt under a leader – disappointment and disaster.

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version is known as the Septuagint, and includes several books not accepted into the Hebrew Canon. Our Old Testament is the Hebrew Canon, and the Apocrypha consists of the remaining books in the Septuagint.



There were many who found in Jesus of Nazareth all the characteristics which they hoped would give him a place in this series. Read the Gospels as sceptically as he may, the discerning reader cannot fail to catch the thrill of expectancy that arose amongst those who first listened to the strange new teaching of this young Rabbi. But when the Gospel writers give us their magnificently restrained accounts of his death, and what followed, it is equally impossible to miss the note of disappointment, especially amongst the men and women who had come closest to Jesus, and to whom, so the Gospels claim, he had made incredible promises.

In spite of the fact that the New Testament was written by men who were no longer disappointed, because of what had happened to them, and although the essence of what they had to write about was, on the contrary, fulfilment, the emptiness of shattered hope has left its mark. For example, 'We hoped that it was he which should redeem Israel' (Luke 24: 21) expresses in words an attitude which had already become apparent in the dejected weariness of Peter, James, and John in the garden of Gethsemane, and in the disillusioned fear of the disciples who were so affected at the moment of crisis that, we are frankly told, 'they all left him and fled' (Mark 14: 50). If this is what happened to the inner circle of disciples, we cannot doubt

that at the time of the Crucifixion amongst many Jews, and especially amongst the simpler and poorer folk who had not been directly concerned to oppose Jesus and plot his downfall, there was a widespread, if vague, feeling of dismay. One more potential Messiah, it would seem, had proved to be at worst an impostor, at best a deluded pretender to the succession of God's 'anointed ones'.

The death of Jesus, then, resulted in relief for some, who were glad to have him out of the way, and in chagrin for others, who were left bewildered by the apparent failure of their leader. But if that were all, it is likely that only a few of us, who happened to be interested in the details of Jewish or Roman history, would ever have heard of this obscure teacher who was crucified, like so many others, in the nervous attempts of the procurators to keep a hold over the stubborn people of Galilee and Judaea. That we do know so much about Jesus: that this knowledge has been shared with such vast numbers of men and women all over the world: that discussion and argument about him continue to hold the attention of multitudes after nearly twenty centuries: that the documents which profess to give first-hand information about him have been more closely studied and scrutinized than any other historical writings: all this, and much more, is the result of a further event which changed the outlook of a comparatively small

number of men and women who had been saddened and shocked by Jesus' death. What that event was can best be understood by the effect it produced in the lives of these men and women.

A few weeks after the Passover festival during which Jesus was killed, there appeared in the streets of Jerusalem a group of men, led by Simon Peter, who seemed anxious to make known certain claims about Jesus which had implications of the deepest and most far-reaching importance for their fellow-countrymen. It is unlikely that any of their speeches were exactly recorded, but a careful study of the second volume of the work attributed to Luke the physician (The Acts of the Apostles), and of the other books of the New Testament, has enabled scholars to analyse what must have been the main points of their preaching.

They proclaimed that what Jesus had said and done he had said and done as God's agent ('in the power of the Spirit'). They claimed that although he had been killed and entombed, he was now alive ('the third day God raised him up'). They further asserted that he now had sovereign power, because God had made him Lord and Messiah ('he was exalted at God's right hand'), and that his reign over all would be realized ('he will come again in glory'). All this meant that the Age of the Messiah, for which the Jews had longed, had dawned; the prophecies had been fulfilled.

These tremendous claims about Jesus were supported by the transformation in the men who made them, and by what they had to say about themselves and about what was now possible for others. They held that they had been empowered by the Risen Christ to witness to these things, as could be seen by their boldness, their confidence, and their joy ('they were filled with the Spirit'). They claimed that in this way God had brought into being a community of forgiven and redeemed people ('the new Israel'). It was their commission to invite all men to turn from their rebellion against God – so clearly exemplified in the murder of Jesus – ('repent ye'), and to accept Jesus as Lord and Christ (the Greek equivalent of 'Messiah'), when they also would find themselves transformed in character and outlook ('receive the Spirit') and enter God's new community.

An examination of this testimony reveals two claims which form the key to the whole. These claims cannot be set aside as the empty words whereby excited men reinterpreted the drama of the Crucifixion and praised the central actor in it. The claims are sustained throughout the New Testament, and the events with which they are concerned are commemorated in the Christian Church annually at Easter and Whitsun. These claims concern the Resurrection and the gift of the Spirit.

What exactly happened on the third day after



Jesus' death to convince the first witnesses that he had risen? The traditions were written down some years after the first preaching took place in Jerusalem. The earliest account is in a letter of Paul of Tarsus (1 Cor. 15: 4-8), written about A.D. 55. Later there appeared the Gospel accounts, of which Mark was probably the earliest. Unfortunately, as we have noticed, in the oldest and most reliable copies of this Gospel, the story breaks off suddenly. Thus we are deprived of the record of the Resurrection as it originally appeared in the earliest written Gospel.

When the five accounts are compared, there are notable differences. For example, Luke and John place the events which convinced the disciples of the Resurrection in and around Jerusalem, whereas Mark apparently (16: 7), and Matthew certainly, place everything, except the visit to the tomb, in Galilee. But behind the variations which have crept into a story passed on by word of mouth for many years: behind the alterations which speakers of different outlook and strong convictions make, consciously or unconsciously, when they try to interpret what they have seen and heard: behind the documents and the oral tradition which preceded them: behind all this lies an event, the experience of the Empty Tomb. Whilst it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt to describe what took place behind the sealed stone door

of the rocky cavern in which the body of Jesus had been laid, it is difficult to believe that the Jewish and Roman officials who were jointly responsible for his death would not have disproved the Resurrection claim of the disciples by producing the body of Jesus, had they been able to do so.

Yet more significant than these questions and issues, which we cannot now investigate, is the transformation in the disciples themselves, and the conviction which drove them to make the claims about Jesus that they did. The choice to be made by the man of reason, who tries to weigh the evidence before him, is clear. Can he accept as satisfactory an explanation of the origin and development of the whole Christian movement, with its tremendous effect upon the thoughts and actions of men, which claims that its originators were either victims of a delusion, or deceivers? Cold reason might well lead us to say something like the following. What the disciples saw and heard at the Tomb, or in Galilee and Jerusalem, must have been as objective, as 'real', as anything else of which, by way of our senses, we become certain. Whatever the exact nature of this may be, it is best described in the way in which they described it, namely 'that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!'

But the man of reasoning faith – and it is one of the main objects of this book to present the Christian faith as reasonable – goes much further

than this. He looks back at the whole series of events which are interpreted in the Old Testament, and which have been briefly reviewed in a previous chapter; and he sees there a pattern of God's activity towards mankind or, rather, towards Israel in particular and towards mankind in general, through his Servant (or Son) Israel. This pattern can only be presented in paradoxical terms, at the human level. The God whom the Israelites knew was not an idea by which the Universe might be explained or the deepest philosophical problems solved. He was the Living God who, as they so frequently and happily recalled, had 'brought them out of Egypt'. Through his working, or by his Spirit, captivity had led to greater freedom, terrible loss had been the path to truer gain (as in the Babylonian exile), suffering could be transformed into the birth-pangs of peace and blessedness (as in the Servant Songs), and out of apparent defeat had come real victory. •

Faith sees this pattern, not as a fact to be observed and noted, not as a comfortable and optimistic basis for a philosophy of history, but as a tragic element in the story of disobedient humanity which stirs the emotions and challenges the will. Ever and again Israel, called to be the Servant, had failed to respond to the Spirit. She had wilfully misinterpreted the 'signs of the times', tragically misread the loving judgements of God. But the

whole tragic process is incomplete until, through a faith which is informed by reason, moved by repentant sorrow, and which involves a conscious act of moral decision, we *see*: the eyes of faith are opened, and we observe the pattern fulfilled in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Of all the paradoxes the greatest and most inclusive seems now to force itself upon us: through death comes life. It was this interconnectedness, this realization of fulfilment, that caused the first preachers of Jesus to appeal to their Jewish audience in terms which sound strangely in our ears. 'The events we proclaim,' they said, 'this unjust and cruel death, this rising again, this change in ourselves, shown in our boldness and power of speech, has all happened by "the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" [Acts 2: 23], as "fore-shewed by the mouth of all the prophets". The promises are fulfilled.'

It is a mistake to imagine that such sayings, which occur over and over again in the New Testament, simply mean that the prophets were seers and soothsayers who looked into the future and wrote down detailed accounts of what was to come, or gave veiled and cryptic hints of what would happen in future centuries. Rather, they had shown the way of God's working. They had discerned the nature of his dealings with men. The impact of the Resurrection upon those who had



taken to heart the teaching of Jesus himself brought about an understanding and a way of looking at the Old Testament which we now take for granted, but which was a new thing to the Jews. So, repeatedly, when later the Gospels were written down, the attempt was made to show that at every point the life and deeds of Jesus, and especially his death, were 'according to the Scriptures'. Sometimes, no doubt, the writer has altered the event to fit the prophecy (for example, the account of the entry into Jerusalem in Matt. 21: 2, 5, 7); more often, the prophecy was interpreted to fit the event (as in Matt. 2: 15).

But the importance of the insistence on fulfilment of the Scriptures lies in the reference, not to particular verses in the Old Testament, but to whole passages from which we can discern God's way. And as we do so, we are convinced, as hundreds of men and women who listened to the disciples were convinced, that belief in a crucified carpenter as the Christ, the Anointed of God, is not a scandal and a blasphemy, but entirely consistent with the deepest insight of the prophets. Further, it enables us to say that belief in the Resurrection, and faith in the Living Lord, satisfy our intellectual and emotional longings. The Living Jesus fulfils the pattern – the challenge of the tragic event and the transforming power of God working through responsive persons and groups – which forms the

essence of the religious experience of Israel, and probably of all true religious experience, and which is shown in the condition of our race, in every age and every place.

If the first key-event was the Resurrection, the second, linked with it in the closest way, was the Gift of the Spirit. According to tradition, as recorded in Acts it was some seven weeks after the Passover at which Jesus was crucified that there came to his witnesses the experience which drove them out to make their proclamation. In John 20: 22 the giving is placed on the evening of Easter Day itself. Perhaps the main point to be emphasized here is that whereas it was gradually, and often through individual, and comparatively private, experiences that these men and women had come to the realization that Jesus was alive (e.g. Mary Magdalene and Thomas: John 20), the culmination came in a group experience when 'they were all together in one place' (Acts 2: 1).

One does not need to be a specialist student of group psychology to know how emotion can be intensified, determination strengthened, and a new influx of energy received when a number of persons meet, with common ideals and a united purpose. What was common to the members of this group was not a belief or an ideal; rather it was that they had met the Risen Jesus. The purpose in which they were united was not external to the

group, as it is in the case of an army cooperating to conquer an enemy, or the staff of a school working together to teach others. It is true that the disciples had to conquer opposition, had to impart new ideas, but these tasks were only incidental and instrumental to their main purpose, which was to convince others that Jesus was alive, so that they too might enter the group, the Fellowship, and receive what its members had already received.

It may seem the extreme of arrogance for a group to be concerned ultimately with its own increase, until we realize that this Fellowship was seen from the first as the agent of God's salvation, the inheritor of his promises to the old Israel which had failed him, and unlimited in its extent by any barriers of race, class, or sex. Once again, the event was interpreted 'according to the Scriptures', and it was Peter's conviction that the promise of the book of Joel had now been fulfilled. 'In the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh' (Acts 2: 17). The last days, the hoped-for time, had come; and the Fellowship longed above all to share its gift with all mankind (cf. Matt. 28: 19 and 24: 14). Therefore the Fellowship began its work, not by opposing its enemies with violence, not by trying to reform their lives or educate them (though its successors in later generations have often conceived their task in such terms); but it began by living a new life, and by preaching the

Good News of the Risen Lord, so that others might enter and live it too.

This new beginning, this creation of a Fellowship whose members had new powers, was the gift of the Spirit, which Jesus had promised. The experience of the Resurrection had brought an understanding of many things which Jesus had told them, but which in their dejection they had forgotten, or perhaps had misunderstood (see Matt. 26: 61). But now, at the Feast of Pentecost, the Jewish Festival at which the Covenant at Sinai was remembered, their Master's promise of the Holy Spirit which could only be theirs through his own departure (his death and glorification) was fulfilled.

According to the narrative of Acts, upwards of a hundred men and women, including the Apostles (1: 15), found themselves possessed of new powers: ecstatic utterance, prophecy, ability to heal and to perform miracles. Such external signs would make the first, striking impression. But the trend of the New Testament, as the next chapter makes clear, suggests that they came to see the change in their character and their attitude to others as more important than all such external manifestations of the Spirit's power. This inward change in disposition and character is summed up in the Greek word *agapé*, to be translated 'charity' or 'love', and was accompanied by complete faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, an unquenchable hope in his



ultimate triumph and power to save. In this conviction they went out and, in the face of great opposition, won over large numbers of their fellow-Jews. Many of them were Jews of the Dispersion, that is to say descendants of Jews who had been scattered abroad by earlier troubles under Greek and Roman rule, to settle elsewhere in the Mediterranean area, and who had now returned to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost (Acts 2).

‘Won’ seems the right word, for it was the testimony of their words and of their life that brought hundreds to repentance and a new allegiance to the crucified and risen Lord. Many had lived in complacent assurance that because they were children of Abraham by birth or through baptism, and kept the Jewish Law, they had nothing to fear and were at peace with God; now they became convinced that they were still in rebellion against him, and that only through this Christ could they truly belong to God and find salvation. So there appeared, within Judaism, and not as a breakaway movement from it, a growing Fellowship of those who believed that they were the fulfilment of Israel’s destiny. They continued to worship in the Temple (Acts 2: 46), and to live as Jews, bound by the *Torah*; but they were held together by their allegiance to Christ in God’s new creation, the Fellowship of the Spirit.

This group within Jewry was set apart by certain

definite customs and practices. The sign which John the Baptizer had adopted, when he set out to persuade his countrymen that they all needed to repent, was taken over as a fitting symbol of the new allegiance. Jesus himself and many of his disciples had submitted to John's baptism in Jordon. But now baptism was 'in the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 2: 38; 8: 16). This probably means that the convert was required to testify to his faith in Jesus as Lord before he was sealed as a member of the Fellowship. It would seem that it was at the time of making this act of allegiance that the new powers, the fruits of the gift of the Spirit, began to appear in the majority of the new members. But baptism was not automatically accompanied by the gift (Acts 8: 14-17), nor was it an essential preliminary to the coming of the Spirit (Acts 18: 25).

Life in the new group at first involved a sharing of property (Acts 2: 45; 4: 34 f.), but this early experiment in 'communism' (in one sense of that word) had some grave defects later on, when the Jerusalem Christians were reduced to great poverty. It is clear, in spite of this, that one of the first impulses of those who saw what God had given them in Christ was to give all that they could to him and to the Fellowship. In some form, sharing is one of the essential characteristics of the Christian Fellowship.

But above all, the group was made distinct by the practice of 'the breaking of bread' (Acts 2: 42, 46). Indeed, there is an interesting early variant of the text of Acts (the 'Western' text) which gives verse 42 in translation as 'they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching, in the fellowship of the breaking of the Loaf and the prayers'. To eat together is an ancient and widespread way of expressing the unity of a group; but in this case the Loaf which was taken and broken was a symbol of especially deep significance.

Here, first, was represented the corporate unity of the Fellowship which had been created by the Spirit, and of the 'bread from heaven' whereby it was sustained. But, secondly, here was a perpetuation of one of the holiest and most loving memories cherished by the Apostles, that last meal in the Upper Room which they had shared with Jesus on the evening of his betrayal. He had taken a loaf and broken it, giving thanks to God, and had distributed it among them, saying, 'This is my body.' He had also shared amongst them a cup of wine, saying, 'This is my blood of the covenant' (Mark), or 'This is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke). Again, however, the earliest written record is in I Cor. 11.

Whether it was the practice of the disciples, or of the new Fellowship from its inception, to repeat the pattern of the Last Supper at regular intervals,

or whether the full symbolism of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist as we know it was gradually developed from a ritual meal taken in common, we cannot certainly judge. It is noteworthy that Mark 14 records no command of Jesus to repeat the Meal as a memorial. It is, however, sufficient for the purposes of this chapter to note that very soon the members of the Fellowship were meeting regularly (probably weekly, on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, which had become to them sacred as the Day of Resurrection, Acts 20: 7) to share the Loaf and the Cup, and to remember thereby the wonderful way in which Jesus had interpreted to them the meaning of his death. The breaking of his body symbolized not so much the tearing of flesh, but the whole agony of man despised, rejected, beaten, and tortured to death, and the outpouring of his life (which, to the Hebrew was 'in the blood', Lev. 17: 11). All this was given willingly in the completion of the work of God's true Servant, and these were the very means by which new life, which included forgiveness and release from bondage and fear, had come to them.

Thus was the unity of the Fellowship maintained and expressed in a central act of worship which was at once a thanksgiving, a remembrance, and a presentation of the way of utter self-sacrifice and dedication to the will of God, which was the fulfil-



ment of his purpose to bring into being a community of reconciled and obedient men and women. For the Loaf represented both the body of Jesus, yielded entire to God, yet 'broken' in serving him; and also the corporate Body of the Fellowship, whose members thus realized that the life they shared was likewise dedicated wholly to God, and therefore involved a sharing of the sufferings of Christ. Yet in this they knew great joy, for was not this the feast of the Messianic Age, to which the Jews had looked forward, the celebration of the new era that had begun, the Day of Fulfilment?

There is so much more to be seen in this solemn act of worship that it is presumptuous to attempt, in a few sentences, even to indicate its significance. But the New Testament shows how the understanding of that significance came gradually; and present practice is a constant reminder that many and varied interpretations have been given to this central Christian rite. The important thing is that here is something more than words or doctrines, a dramatic rite of deep spiritual significance, which from very early times was a distinguishing mark of those who later were called Christians. It is a rite by which the Fellowship was held together, and held to the key-event, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This key-event was both the source of its life, and the heart of its message to the world.

The Fellowship had been created when the

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

Spirit came, welding into a unity the small number of men and women who had experienced the visible, tangible presence of the Risen Jesus. They had learned, since the day of Resurrection, that he was still with them, and his power still at work among them, even though they could no longer touch or see the body that had been nailed to the cross. But as they went out, in the new power of the Spirit that he had promised, to win others to allegiance to the Christ, they came to realize that this Fellowship was itself his corporate Body, the means whereby the Lord Jesus continued to influence the lives of men. So, in all they did for him, he was with them; but above all, in the common meal, in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine, as they shared and remembered, so they knew the real presence of One who has said 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Matt. 28: 20). The realization of that Presence is the essence of Christianity.

## CHAPTER 5

### *St Paul: Apostle and Exponent of the Faith*

JESUS himself compared the kingdom of God to a great tree, growing up from a tiny seed until it becomes large enough for the birds to make nests in its branches (Mark 4: 30-2). Most of us have looked at some time in wonder at the sturdy trunk of some giant of the forest, rising high into the air, supporting the tremendous weight of a hundred branches. This sight must have impressed the Akan people of West Africa, for one of the most potent of their names for the Creator God is *Tweaduampon*, which many now take to mean 'Lean on a tree, and not fall'. We should hardly believe that such a tree could spring from a little black seed falling into the soil, had we not seen its first sprouting in the rains, and the different stages from the first inch of growth to the three- or four-ton giants standing supported by great buttresses and roots. Can we try to picture the growth of Christianity in the same way?

What we now know as a world-wide religion, with branches spreading into every land, began in the reign of Tiberius Caesar as a growth so small that many of the historians of the period were able to ignore it altogether. A few Jewish men and

women, united by a common faith in Jesus as Lord, and distinguished from their fellow-countrymen only by certain customs and their loving care for all members of the Fellowship – what was this but a new and unimportant offshoot of Judaism? How did it come about that the new faith spread so rapidly, winning converts in all the provinces at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and was very soon established in the great cities, in Antioch, Ephesus, even Rome itself?

It seems clear from the New Testament that, whilst Peter and the other Apostles went about and around Jerusalem, and probably Galilee, proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, the group in Jerusalem itself very soon recognized as its leader James, the brother of the Lord. It is difficult for us to realize that at first believers in Christ had no distinctive name, though what they believed and practised soon became known as 'the Life' (Acts 5: 20) or 'the Way' (Acts 9: 2). They were seen as Jews who had added a new belief to the ancient faith of the children of Abraham. James himself continued to attach great importance to keeping the Jewish Law, and as far as he was concerned, the Christian Fellowship might well have remained an offshoot of Judaism. No doubt he found his conservative attitude confirmed and strengthened by the violence aroused when a different outlook was publicly expressed.



Evidence of this different outlook appears quite early in Acts. In chapter 6 we read of Grecian Jews (Hellenists), as opposed to Hebrews. The former were Greek-speaking Jews who had come to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman Empire, where they had been converted to the Christian Way. This group first comes before us when they were dissatisfied with the distribution of gifts to the poorer members of the Fellowship, and we are informed that seven of their number (all have Greek names) were chosen to supervise that early and very practical expression of 'love of the brethren'. But it is also clear that this group, besides insisting upon equity in the distribution of the Fellowship's charities, also proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ in a way that roused the anger of the unconverted Jews. This is plainly shown in the story of Stephen, 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit', who stands out among these Hellenists as a pioneer.

Stephen's work was much more than that of an almoner. It was his preaching that aroused the opposition to take legal action, and his speech in Acts 7 was no doubt typical of the teaching of this group. The argument there put forward is not easy for modern readers to follow, but its main purport is clear. Throughout their history the descendants of Abraham had failed God. They had disobeyed, they had turned to the worship of idols,

they had 'resisted the Holy Spirit'. Now, in their rejection of Jesus, and in their attitude to his followers, they had brought their disobedience to a head, and could no longer be called 'the Chosen people'. Moreover, as the speech shows, there was no case for thinking that the true worship and service of God were linked to Judaea, to Jerusalem, and to its temple. The key-events, the great revealing acts of God, had taken place in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in the desert of Sinai; and who could believe that the Most High dwelt in 'houses made with hands', or was confined to one place or one people?

If we are looking for the origin of such teaching, it is not enough to say that the Christians who, before their conversion, had been affected by Hellenistic culture were bound to have an outlook different from that of the Palestinian Jews. It was a group of Hellenistic Jews who opposed Stephen (Acts 6: 9). There is evidence in abundance in the Gospels, and especially in Luke's other treatise, to show that Stephen and his friends were stating a truth which came from the lips of Jesus himself. Chapter 2, above, has already shown how his teaching on matters of conduct emphasized inward attitudes as much as outward action; the demand was for ethical goodness, not ritual observance. To be born a Jew was no guarantee of God's favour, nor were his servants confined to one race,

to those who worshipped in the Temple at Jerusalem or conformed outwardly to the *Torah*.

In this Jesus had been preceded by the great prophets, whose outlook implicitly contradicted the exclusive outlook of the Jews. The wider outlook had become explicit in books written during the Exile in Babylon (586-538 B.C.), notably in Isaiah 40-55, but it became obscured again in the centuries following. Even more pointed is Luke's account of the reaction at Nazareth, at the beginning of the ministry, to the words in which Jesus extolled a widow from the hated land of Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4). He had healed a centurion's child; and, as the Fourth Gospel tells us, he had taken time and care to teach a Samaritan woman that 'God is Spirit'; true worship is confined neither to Jerusalem nor to Mount Gerizim (John 4).

Stephen, in the spirit of his Master, stood for the Gospel which is for all nations; and his stand brought about a fierce persecution during which all but the Apostles were driven from Jerusalem, and Stephen himself was stoned to death. The account of that first martyrdom tells us more than pages of doctrine could about the faith of these first converts in the glorious God, at whose right hand their Lord now was, through whom the Holy Spirit had come to them. But the story also introduces us to a young Jew called Saul, a Roman citizen of Tarsus, who, in his zeal as a Pharisee,

looked upon Stephen's death as a righteous act of judgement against men who seemed to be perverters of the truth.

The scattering of almost all the members of the Christian Fellowship had one good result. Those who fled from persecution carried the Proclamation about Jesus with them, and many new centres of the faith sprang up. We read of the work of Philip (Acts 8), but there must have been many unnamed witnesses, who carried the message to Damascus, Antioch, Phoenicia, and Cyprus, as Philip had taken it to Samaria and coastal towns like Caesarea. Saul, however, did his best to stamp out the spreading fire; armed with letters from the High Priest, he set out to capture those who had taken refuge in Damascus. What happened to him on the way is so important for an understanding of the nature and development of Christianity that it must be considered at length. The result was that Saul, who had been ready to kill or imprison any of his Jewish brethren who dared to follow the Way, was himself baptized as a convinced believer in the Christ, and became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. In those few of his letters which have been preserved in the New Testament we find an interpretation of the new Faith which has been taken as an authoritative guide for Christian theologians for nineteen centuries. What was it that happened to Paul?



Many students of psychology have attempted to throw light upon this momentous event, and their work gives us understanding in the sense that we no longer have to regard Paul's conversion as something isolated and unique, quite removed from our experience. Their theories, however, must not be allowed to distract our attention from the one fact that mattered to Paul himself. All three accounts of his conversion (in chapters 9, 22, and 26 of Acts) make one thing central. Paul met Jesus Christ. The light he saw, the light that was thrown upon his own condition, came from the Risen Lord.

The experience came as the end of a long process, in which a man liable to great emotional stress, in a state of mental and spiritual tension, was going through a struggle (probably largely unconscious) which may have begun when he saw how courageously Stephen met his death. His increased passion for persecution is characteristic of such a state of mind. But the vision itself was such as to make Paul cry out 'Who art thou, Lord'; and the voice which he heard convinced him that the Christ whose followers he had tried so hard to obliterate was no figment of a fanatical religious imagination, but the living, personal Lord.

Moreover, Paul remained certain, for as long as we can follow him through the dramatic years of his laborious and dangerous missionary work, that

his own apostleship was just as much an act of personal choice and commission by Jesus Christ as the choosing and sending out of the Twelve had been (see Paul's own testimony in II Cor. 11 : 22 to 12 : 10). In the face of violent opposition it was his vivid sense of the personal presence of his Master which sustained him. When his opponents began to question his right to preach and teach in the name of Christ, his answer was to point to the change wrought in himself, and to the effect which his work had had upon others (see II Cor. 13). Any who doubt him must face precisely the same challenge.

The story of Paul's journeys through what is now Asia Minor, and later into the countries we know as Greece and Italy, is well known. It might be said that he and Barnabas, with their various helpers, such as John Mark, and later Luke the doctor, were introducing Christianity into the Roman Empire. As they travelled, with the message of Jesus Christ, and proclaimed it amidst antagonism, there sprang up groups of men and women (Paul calls them 'the saints') drawn by their faith into fellowship. The New Testament, after Acts 11, uses the word 'church' for these local groups of Christians, in Antioch (where they first were so called), in Caesarea, and in many towns and cities visited by the missionaries. There were soon a large number of such local churches.

But 'church' (the Greek word *ecclesia*) is also used in the singular to designate the whole of that new community which, as shown in Chapter 4 above, was proclaimed from the first as the New Israel, the Messianic (i.e. Christian) community. It is very important to understand this double usage, and to see that the founding of churches, whether by Paul or any other missionary of the Faith, is at the same time the growth of the Universal Church of God.

The evidence of the New Testament does not support the idea that all the churches were identical, or even very similar, in their organization, customs, ways of worship, or in the details of their interpretation of the Gospel. It does on the other hand give a clear picture of their feeling of belonging together, because they had been created by the same Spirit, and owed a common loyalty to one Lord. The old Israel was a racial community, into which the outsiders (Gentiles) might enter only if they were willing to obey the Jewish Law, in which the requirements of circumcision and the prohibitions regarding food presented the most obvious points of difference from Roman Law and pagan religious practice. Our interest here will be less in the geographical spread of the Church than in the way in which it broke through the racial and nationalistic bounds of Judaism, and became in very truth *universal*, or catholic. It was Paul's

interpretation of the Gospel, arrived at during the midst of the struggle, which was of critical importance.

We have seen how the party represented by Stephen made the first break with a strictly Jewish Christianity. Luke gives us glimpses of the work of Philip in this regard, but concentrates on Simon Peter who, through a vision described in Acts 10, and through his experience in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea, became convinced that the Gentiles were to be received into the Church. These foreigners had heard his preaching gladly, and had 'received the Holy Spirit'. He could see in them the same signs as had been evident when the first Fellowship was created in Jerusalem, and therefore he baptized them into the name of Christ.

Once again, psychology can help us to understand the inward conflict in Peter's mind, perhaps arising through arguments with his fellow Jewish-Christians. The signs of the coming outward struggle are seen when Peter, after returning to Jerusalem, was taken to task for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles, and had to defend himself (Acts 11). But it was Paul who saw to the heart of the problem, because it was his own problem; it was Paul who knew the answer, because he knew Christ; and Paul, because he was a man of two worlds, with a brilliant mind and a sensitive spirit,



who made the answer clear in a manner which operated a distinctive change in the ways of Western thought.

At this stage, we must see that Judaism in the first century had become a legalistic religion, in the sense that the benefits it offered were thought of as the result of keeping the Law. This was the reason for the influence of the many scribes and lawyers who worked out the implications of the Mosaic Law, and taught the people how to obey it. Most of them were Pharisees, a religious group who with great earnestness and sincerity taught that God would reward in the resurrection to come all who kept the Law. They also held that, if only enough of God's people did thus obey, the Messiah would come, the Kingdom of God would be established, and the Jews restored to pre-eminence among the nations.

How hard Paul had struggled to be a good Pharisee! But his later writings indicate that, living within the pattern of Pharisaic belief, he had never been able to feel sure that he had kept the Law, and deserved the divine reward. Whether his words in Romans 7 are autobiographical or not, they express in a deeply moving way the tenseness of such a conflict. Because of his sin, because of his failure to obey, such a man feels himself under God's condemnation. So he remains fearful of 'death', afraid that he will be cut off for ever from

fellowship with God, and deprived of the resurrection life in God's kingdom which is the reward of obedience. How many Pharisees must have shared this fear; how many since – Jews, Muslims, and indeed Christians who have never come to a true understanding of their religion – have gone through life inwardly divided by just such uncertainty! How many of our 'freedom-loving peoples' must so remain in spiritual slavery!

But Paul the apostle, 'the slave of Jesus Christ' as he liked to call himself, was a man set free. His zeal as a Pharisee was now replaced by a greater zeal to give his message of freedom to the Jews of the Dispersion. When their failure to respond, their attempts to thwart him, drove Paul from the synagogues, he began to preach instead in Tyrannus the philosopher's lecture-rooms (Acts 19: 9). For he knew that his message spelt freedom also for those who had lost hope in the capricious gods of Greece and Rome, who found no security in the wisdom of the sages.

To Jews, and to those familiar with Judaism, Paul spoke in a special way. What the Law could not do – that is, what you can never succeed in deserving by obeying the Law – God has done for you in Jesus Christ. You can never meet what you think are God's demands. You can never *earn* his forgiveness. You thought that the men who put Jesus to death were helping God by carrying out

his judgement on a Law-breaker, a blasphemer. But the Resurrection proves that his sufferings and death were not punishment, for God has raised him up to show that he is the perfect Servant, the true Son of God. Thus should have ended once for all the belief that pain, condemnation by human authority (even religious authority), even death by hanging or crucifixion, are conclusive signs of God's anger.

But the converse is also true. Failure to obey the Law, and the deeper rebellion which cuts a man off from God, which was thought to be the cause of such anger and punishment, is now seen no longer as a barrier which man must move by his own efforts. As an ardent Pharisee, Saul had believed that a man had to win his way to freedom from the power of sin if he were to be justified, that is, to have a right standing before God. But Paul as a Christian knew that, in trusting Christ, he had entered into a new status: he was accepted of God. As a result of this (and not vice versa) there was a new power in his life, enabling him to conquer the evil within him and without. For Christ had come to Paul, to the Paul who had hated him and his followers. The change in Paul, and his new sense of freedom, of being right with God, had come to him through God's initiative in Christ, and not at all through his own deserving. In New Testament language, he had been justified. God

had declared him righteous, was accounting him righteous, sinner though he was. Paul knew that, in his own case, God had done what the prophet of the Exile had said God's Servant would do. By his innocent suffering, Christ had justified many (cf. Isa. 53, especially verse 11).

This initiative of God, this doing for men what men could never deserve, Paul calls *grace*, and the heart of his message is summed up as 'justification by grace'. It had happened to Paul. But because there was no question of his having specially deserved it, Paul knew that this was no special privilege. God is no respecter of persons. How then could others be justified? Must they just wait until God chose to do this gracious thing for them too?

It is easy to dismiss this doctrine of justification by grace as if it left men with no means of doing anything about their own relationship with God except to sit down and wait for God to put it right. But that is to fail to follow Paul's meaning. He knew that it was not just a matter of sitting and waiting, because he and the other witnesses were actively engaged in bringing the message of God's gracious power to men. They were God's agents, not just carrying words, but bringing forgiveness to men. The whole Church was bringing Christ to men. If it does not, it is not worthy of the name. Here is the keynote of all true missionary work.



Now look at the matter from the point of view of the man not yet touched by the message, not yet set free. In one sense, he must wait until Christ is brought to him. Therein lies the urgency of missionary work. But this is not waiting for God to act. God has already acted; Christ has been crucified, and is risen. As Paul puts it, 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5: 8). We may not be aware of it, but it has been done. Further, no man can ever be in that terrible state of wanting Christ to come to him, and having to wait hopelessly. The very fact of wanting Christ is a sign of God's touch, and all Jewish believers were and are in this position. The Law, for all its failure, had made them realize their need. For them, one thing is necessary. What they lack is faith in Christ, in what God has done in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Such faith (as the word is used by Paul, as in Ephes. 2: 8, 'By grace have ye been saved, through faith') is not just believing *that* Jesus is the Christ. It represents a relationship of personal trust, an active relationship which is believing *in* Christ.

This part of our introduction of Christianity ranks so high in importance that it must be emphasized for the sake of clarity. The fact with which Paul begins is his knowledge that nothing a man can do can win a reward from God, or buy God's favour. It is not even possible to say: we

must have faith in order to gain what God offers in Christ. For to have faith is already to be in that relationship of trust which is just what God is giving. It is not possible to separate faith and justification, any more than it is possible for the front and back of a patterned cloth to be separated. What God asks and what God offers are not related as work is related to reward. They are two sides of the same reality. The best that God can give to a man is that he should be justified, and that is just what God demands. In the same spirit Jesus said, 'My meat is to do the will of him that sent me' (John 4: 34).

Such is the heart of Paul's message to the Jews. When speaking to Gentiles, he knew it must be preceded by an awakening of men to their need for the true God. But God had not hidden himself from them. The ordered world speaks of God's creative power and purpose, and their own moral experience was a clue to God's righteousness (Rom. 1 and 2). The philosopher's recognition of natural law was the sign that the Gentiles could not escape blame by the plea of ignorance. By skilful use of his knowledge of Greek literature, Paul led his pagan hearers on to an understanding that the God they had vaguely glimpsed, whose wisdom they had appreciated perhaps better than the Jews, had been making himself known in the history of the people of Israel. The place to find him was in no

man-made temple, whether Jewish or pagan. For God, the truth they were seeking, was in Christ. The way to gain immortality was not by secret knowledge and ritual, such as their mystery religions claimed to give to a few privileged initiates. Life was to be found in the Lord whom God had raised from the dead.

Throughout Paul's world a belief in a number of stages of mediation between the divine and the human was widespread. This was a kind of ladder by which, as a man gained true knowledge, he might climb out of earthly material existence, with its pains and imperfections, into the realm of the eternal and unchanging. To those who thought in such terms, Paul proclaimed, 'there is one God, one mediator also between God and man, himself man, Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2: 5, which, if not from Paul's hand, certainly represents his teaching). In such profound language, with such clear relevance to the outlook of the Gentiles, because his own thinking had been moulded by Hellenistic culture and thought-patterns, Paul led his hearers to seek a deeper understanding of who Jesus was and what he had done for men.

These are the doctrines which theologians group under the title 'The Person and Work of Christ'. To expound them, Paul had to draw on the riches of Hebrew prophetic religion, of which, as a Pharisee, he had learned so much. Many Gentiles

responded. To look at the other side of the cloth, God touched and called them into a right relationship with himself through Christ. So there came to be, within the fellowship of the Christian Church, a great multitude of men and women who had never been Jews, either by birth or conversion. The description of the controversy that resulted makes it possible to show even more clearly just what it was that Paul was concerned to teach.

The questions that arose were these: Ought the male Gentiles thus received into the Church to be circumcised? Should all such converts be required to conform to the Jewish Law? Could Jews, forbidden to eat so many kinds of food, and in particular all flesh from which the blood had not been drained, feel free to sit at table with Gentile Christians who were under no such restriction? There are some distressing passages in the New Testament which tell us of the disagreement in the Church's ranks over such matters. They reveal that the Jewish Christians who tried to interfere with Paul's work were not above using underhand methods, and even went so far as to cast doubt on his apostleship.

In Acts 15 we read of a Council which took place at Jerusalem (at which exact point in Paul's life-story it is difficult to determine) at which Paul and Barnabas testified before the apostles and elders to the signs which showed that God had indeed



accepted the Gentiles. Peter also added his witness. It is noticeable that the words 'faith' and 'grace' take an important place in his protestations (Acts 15: 7-11). At the end James, who was still looked upon as leader, and was spokesman for the whole body, gave out a decision which was clearly a triumph for Paul's point of view. The Gentiles were not to be burdened. Circumcision was not necessary. But certain requirements of the Law naturally could not be waived, even for Gentiles. One reputable version of the text reduces the Decree to three prohibitions: the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, and murder. Whatever the exact decision, it remains true that Paul and the other missionaries were set free to spread their message of God's grace in Christ to all who would listen.

The phrase which Luke uses in recording this decision of the Council reminds us that neither he, nor Paul, nor any other New Testament writer thought of the advance of the Church and the development of its teaching as something resulting merely from human effort and decision. 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15: 28) shows that they saw in this decision the hand of God. They were not saying that human wills had been overruled by a Spirit who dictated what they should do. Rather, a fellowship of men committed to the service of Christ, who had met to seek the

will of God, hereby expressed their belief that the seal of the Spirit had been given to their agreed decision.

Two promises of Jesus lie behind such words. 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18: 20) is the first. It seems to be reinterpreted in the Fourth Gospel: 'But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you' (John 14: 26). So, throughout the story of Acts, it was the Holy Spirit who guided and empowered the work of the missionaries. Paul, who was so conscious of the signs of the Spirit's working in his own life, in the life of each new convert, and in the churches, developed in his letters a doctrine of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit which forms another great contribution to the whole pattern of Christian thinking. Just as the Spirit was the One through whose unseen influence men were brought to God in Christ, so, in their new life, and especially in their own new life *together*, the Spirit gave them power to express in outlook and action their new relationship to God. Paul's letters are full of references to the gifts, the fruits of the Spirit, which he set against 'the works of the flesh' (see especially Gal. 5: 16-25, and 1 Cor. 12 and 13).

Here, we return to a question about conduct,

about doing right, which is bound to arise when men are told that there is nothing they can do to win God's favour. Are there then no rules, no laws attached to the Christian religion? If not, the majority of those who have tried to understand the message of Christian preaching will think they have been grossly deceived by the official representatives of the Faith. The question requires us to look again at the central teaching of Paul. We have seen that the struggle for freedom from the Jewish Law was won in the assurance that an open-hearted acceptance of all men into the Fellowship on equal terms, without regard to their race, was a true expression of the mind and intention of Christ. But Paul was just as certain that the demands of God, God's righteousness of which the Jewish scriptures spoke so forcibly, could not be forgotten. Christians were not set free, as some converts liked to think, from all law. To be justified was to enter by faith into the New Israel.

What then does justification mean, exactly? What it meant for Paul is clear. It is something God does, which men cannot secure by merit. This divine activity is appropriated – and so becomes something affecting the individual – by faith alone. Faith does not bring it about, but faith responding to God's love makes what God has done real in the life of each believer. The only ground of justification is the atoning work of

Christ. On this basis a man has assurance that he is accepted of God, and the Judgement is no longer something to be feared. This assurance is rooted in the certainty of the final triumph of God.

On these grounds, men are declared righteous. This is no fictitious righteousness, no imaginary goodness somehow imputed to us when we have not really got it. It is not a magical power put into us. It is not a human achievement. It only seems to be any of these things because we try to separate what cannot be separated. Paul's language is difficult for us, and easily misinterpreted. 'In his death, Jesus Christ was set forth by God as a means of bringing us back into a right relationship with God, through faith, by his life given for our sakes'; this is a free paraphrase of Rom. 3 : 25. When we surrender trustfully to God's love as we see it in the Cross, then God accepts us for Christ's sake, and accounts us righteous. For then we are righteous, in the sense that we have a right attitude of mind and will.

On the basis of this, we can understand how Paul dealt with the problem of the Law. We have entered into a new Covenant with God. In the words of Jeremiah, the Law is written on our hearts (31 : 33). From now on, we shall not be trying to obey a set of rules, or even just following *our* conscience. Christ takes authority over us, because his love sets us loving. What we have is not a new set of rules,



but a new Spirit. Being justified, we are now sanctified, we grow in holiness by the work of the Holy Spirit. In the early days of the Church, men and women were more impressed by the power the Spirit gave them to prophesy, to heal, to go into ecstasy. As time went on, they found more worthy, and saw as more characteristic of the Spirit, their desire and power to express the attitude and intention of Jesus himself towards men, which is indicated in the New Testament by the word *agapé* (translated inadequately as 'charity' or 'love'). The demands of this 'love' form the pattern of our liberty, and the Spirit gives us power not our own to live this holy life.

It is very easy, especially where the Church is in contact with a people whose culture and customary way of life have been very little touched by Christian influences, to think that this new thing which has appeared, the Church, is a society in which individual membership is optional. We imagine that the Fellowship is something we shall be permitted to join, provided we keep the rules. When we try to discover what these new rules are, we are told that they consist of a code which can be built up from the Sermon on the Mount, and from the end-sections of Paul's letters. Nothing could be a greater perversion of what Paul means by 'the Church'. Let it be admitted that different groups of Christians follow different patterns of worship,

and have different rules for Church membership. These are matters of convenience, or of historical accident, and may often be the result of human error or of plain disobedience.

But for Paul, and, as we believe, in the sight of God, there is one Church, owing allegiance to one Lord Jesus Christ, created by the working of the one Spirit. Into it, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, those whose skins are black, red, yellow, or white, are all received on equal terms. Those terms are acceptance of the fact by each man that he is a sinner who cannot put himself right with God, and acceptance of the grace offered to him in Jesus Christ. This means at the same time acceptance of the freedom of the Spirit, which is also the governing of the Spirit; and acceptance of incorporation into the Church, which is the Body of Christ. For, just as the existence of human life on earth is rooted in the family, and in that belonging together at all levels which we call society, so the new life of the Kingdom of God, the citizenship of heaven, can never concern the individual alone.

Paul, as he went about preaching that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, never forgot that so to be put right with God was to be made a member of the reconciled community, the people of the New Covenant. As he proclaimed the liberty of the Spirit, so he led his people to understand that the Spirit had set them

## ST PAUL: APOSTLE AND EXPONENT

free to follow the law of love which is written in the hearts of men, because they are God's creation, by building them into the Church, which is God's new creation.

How deeply this great man's inspired interpretation of the Faith is summarized in his closing words to the Corinthian Church, words which most Christians have heard and said so often that they forget to think what they mean. Paul prays that there may be with them, first the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which men are brought to God; second the divine *agapé* to which they must respond, because it sets them loving; but third, the experience of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, in which they are free to love; and from which neither death, nor any earthly or spiritual power can ever snatch them – or us – away.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Expansion and Consolidation*

WITHIN twenty-five years of the crucifixion Christians were sufficiently numerous, sufficiently despised, and sufficiently disliked in the capital of the Roman Empire to enable Nero to attach to them the blame for the great fire that burned down a large part of Rome in the summer of A.D. 64. Considering the smallness of the Church's beginnings, this is a remarkable fact. Not only had the Christian faith crossed Asia Minor into Europe, but it had done so in strength and was already making its mark.

The story of this expansion of the Church, from Jerusalem to 'all Judaea and Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts 1: 8), has been preserved for us by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. His material is comprised of early records telling of the beginning and rise of the Christian community, with some account of its beliefs and manner of life, and a few glimpses of its missionary work, together with an account of the travels and work of the Apostle Paul, much of which he saw for himself at first hand. The aim of the history as a whole is to relate how the Gospel came to Rome, and the account closes with Paul a prisoner in that city; but



## EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION

the narrative also tells how the Gospel was preached in many of the main towns of Asia Minor, as well as in Macedonia and Greece.

Acts does not, however, record all the missionary activity of the early Church. It is concerned with the westward expansion but says nothing of the outreach in other directions. Indeed, one may observe how little the New Testament as a whole has to say of the work of the original Twelve Apostles. We hear of Peter and John, and somewhat less of James. But what of the rest? What did they do? Where did they go? James, son of Zebedee, we know was martyred early under Agrippa, who died in A.D. 44 (Acts 12: 2). John is said to have moved to Ephesus, Peter to have exercised an apostolate in Rome. As for the rest of the Apostles, legends provide us with all we can hope to know. Matthew is said to have preached in Ethiopia, Bartholomew to have gone to South Arabia or even India, Thomas to India, and Andrew to Scythia. None of these legends can be proved.

None the less it is certain that Christianity spread both eastwards and southwards during the early centuries. Acts itself records the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, a man 'of great authority' (8: 26-38). When he reached his home, a thousand miles up the Nile, did he spread his new faith among those over whom he ruled? In the account of Pentecost, in what appears to be a liturgical list

of names and places, there is mention of 'Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia', and of those 'from Egypt and the parts of Libya about Cyrene', and also of 'Arabians'; this at least prophesies, if it does not indicate, the spread of the faith to the east and the south. This suggestion becomes evidence when we know that Edessa, a state about 180 miles north-east of Syrian Antioch, became Christian about A.D. 200, and that a quarter of a century later there are said to have been more than twenty bishops in that area and to the east of it. There is reason to think there is substance in the legend of Thomas's work in India. By the fourth century A.D. a Christian deputation from the Emperor Constantius is said to have visited Christians in Arabia, Ethiopia, Socotra, Ceylon, and India. In North Africa Christianity certainly made rapid progress, and Mark is claimed as the first bishop of Alexandria.

The expansion eastwards did not match the westward march of the faith. In Apostolic times, and for long afterwards, the strength of the Christian cause lay in Asia Minor, and to a lesser extent in southern Europe. Nevertheless, the Christian faith within a relatively short period of time spread outwards from Jerusalem to the Tigris on the east and the Tiber on the west, and southwards into North Africa. The agents of this expansion are little known to us, and were probably for the most part

simple men and women, few of them in the first century learned like Paul, and practically none of them influential as persons. The New Testament speaks of apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists many of these giving their whole time to the spread of the faith, and living on the charity and the hospitality of the little house-congregations of the cities and towns.

But there was a large company of others, not dignified by titles as exercising functions in the Church, soldiers, business men, traders and travellers, and 'the weavers, cobblers, washermen, and persons of the most uneducated and rustic kind',\* whose words and example led many into the Church. The source of this success, as they would have claimed, lay in the dynamic message of new life and salvation, God's message revealed to his world in Jesus Christ, and made manifest in the life of the new Fellowship, the Church, through the energy of the Holy Spirit. And what other explanation is sufficient?

The first Christians were Jews, members of the old Israel who had been gathered into the new Messianic order, the new Israel, the Church. The first five chapters of Acts relate something of their belief, thought, and life. The first society of Christians was a simple fellowship of believers, expressing

\* Celsus, a non-Christian writing about the spread of Christianity c. A.D. 180.

their new-found joy and unity through the *agapé*, or love-feast, attending to the apostolic teaching, and worshipping with their fellow Jews in the Temple (Acts 2: 42). They were in the nature of a sect within Judaism, differing from their brethren only in that they believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. But this difference was of immense importance, and cannot be overstressed.

As the full significance of the new faith became apparent, the enmity of the Jew against the Christian increased and became implacable. Peter and John were imprisoned, examined, and threatened almost at once (Acts 4: 21), and yet again (5: 17 f., 29). Stephen was stoned to death (7: 54-60), and James lost his life. During the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70, the Christian community in Jerusalem fled across the Jordan to Pella, and the attempt to maintain contact between the Christian Church and the Jews in the capital was given up. By a process both theological and historical, which has been described in a former chapter, Judaism and Christianity came to be seen for what they were, the one a nationalistic monotheism, rooted in Mosaism, the other a universal monotheism claiming to fulfil the promises and the hopes of Judaism, yet distinct from it. Awareness of this distinction between the two religions grew but slowly within the Christian Fellowship, and for long went unperceived outside it.



Judaism in the Roman Empire was a *religio licita* (i.e. a permitted religion), and so long as Christianity was seen as a variation within the Jewish religion, it was tolerated and believers were exempt from acknowledgement of the state religion. When Paul was sent to Rome as a prisoner about A.D. 61, it was because, after several inconclusive trials on a charge of rioting in Jerusalem, he had appealed to Caesar; and the charge against him would have been, had it been heard, one of causing a breach of the peace, not one of being a Christian. Soon after this, however, a change did take place, and it became a crime to confess to being a Christian. This occurred at the time of the persecution that arose under Nero. In A.D. 64 a great fire broke out in Rome and raged for nearly a week. A large part of the city was destroyed. Nero set to work to rebuild his capital on a grander scale, but a rumour to the effect that the city had been fired at his express order began to gain ground.

So [says Tacitus], to get rid of this rumour, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judaea, the source of the evil, but even

*in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe, which there finds a following. Accordingly arrest was first made of those who confessed; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to illuminate the night when daylight failed.\**

This quotation from Tacitus has been given at length because apart from the general attitude it reveals – note the description of Christianity as a ‘pernicious superstition’, as ‘sordid and degrading’ – it contains two interesting statements. The first is that Christians as a class ‘were hated for their abominations’, the second that they were convicted ‘not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race’. From the second statement we take it that the charge of arson was not proceeded with and another, *odium humani generis*, substituted in its place.

Now what, we may ask, did the Romans see in the Christians that gave this impression? The reference to the abominations practised by Christians is,

\* Quoted from H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*. World's Classics 1959

of course, the persistent belief that at their meetings they practised infanticide, cannibalism, and incest, charges false enough, but based on garbled accounts bandied around the market-place of what took place in the Christian eucharistic rites and within the close fellowship of a society which gave prominence and equal status to women. However, this was not the charge on which the Christians were sent to a cruel death, though the prejudice against them revealed in this remark did much to strengthen suspicion and hatred. The legal charge stated them to be guilty of 'hatred of the human race'; in short that they were anti-social, a menace to the good order of society in general and of the Roman Empire in particular.

We can perhaps illustrate best what is intended if we put ourselves in the place of a first-century Roman official faced with the Christian problem, as he might have called it. He would, of course, have heard the rumours current in the market-place and in general conversation. But being a fair-minded man he would require proof, and he would seek to find out at first hand what Christians believed and practised. His inquiry, however, would not be free of one assumption fundamental to every Roman mind, namely that Roman rule and authority was sacrosanct, and that to deny or flout it was the greatest of all possible crimes.

Here is a statement, taken from a description by

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

Prof. Gilbert Murray, an authority in this field of study, of the way in which men of the time saw the power and authority of Rome.

*Roma, Dea Roma . . . all men could feel that there was in Rome, and the doings of Rome, something beyond the ordinary. Her name struck terror or inspired confidence. A Roman legion was something more than ten thousand soldiers. The Yes or No of a Roman proconsul meant salvation or despair for a whole province. A Roman citizen walked without fear in places where a common man dare not venture. All this meant, in the ancient mind, that Rome was, as they put it, something more than mortal, something divine. Rome was a goddess; or at least there was a divine power behind Rome . . . Rome is the supreme power on earth; Rome brings peace, safety, justice, civilization . . . Rome, a man might feel, represents the will of the gods on earth; let us serve and adore her.\**

Our Roman official would certainly have felt like this about Rome. But how would it affect his judgement of the Christian? There is evidence enough in the New Testament that the Apostolic Church had no desire to antagonize the Roman power, and indeed appreciated the benefits of a strong and just rule in an orderly society (Rom. 13 :

\* 'Pagan Religion at the Coming of Christianity', in *A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. A. S. Peake. Jack, 1929



## EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION

1-7; II Thess. 1-12; I Pet. 2: 13-17). But there would be more to it than this, as the Roman official would soon perceive. The Christian, then as now, acknowledged one Lord. The seed of all possible later conflict between Church and Empire, and in Church and State today, was sown in Peter's words, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5: 29). Much as the Christian appreciated the benefit of Roman rule, he proclaimed himself under the authority not of the Emperor, but of Jesus Christ. This would shock our Roman official to the core.

But this was not all. The many religions of the Roman Empire, including the all-embracing state-religion (Caesar cult), were hateful to the Christian, who was exhorted on Apostolic authority 'to flee from idolatry' (I Cor. 10: 14). The Christian would not compromise with paganism in any form and adopted a negative attitude towards everything remotely connected with it. The result of this attitude was, in effect, that he cut himself off from public and social life. He could accept no official position, for official life was contaminated by pagan practices. In social life he refused to participate in doubtful amusements, such as the theatre and gladiatorial combats, both because they were degrading and because, as some considered, even these were tinged with the worship of pagan gods. Since meat sacrificed to idols was in the markets and might be

offered them at a meal in a non-Christian home, some Christians felt that they could neither shop with their fellows nor enjoy the fellowship of a meal with non-Christian friends. All pagan feasts and festivals were eschewed.

Thus, in every direction, the conduct of the Christian reflected the fact that he was subject to an authority which was not the state. He tended to be cut off from participation in the surrounding pagan life, and his attitude marked him out in the eyes of his non-Christian contemporaries as uncooperative and anti-social. They held him guilty of hatred of humanity; his religion appeared, in the words of Suetonius, a novel and mischievous superstition. Novel indeed, for who (except intransigent Jews) would refuse to take part in the rites and ceremonies of the society within which one found security? Mischievous, because in this attitude lay the seeds of disruption and decay within the state. So at least our official would have judged, and would have condemned the Christian accordingly.

From the time of Nero onwards it became legal to put Christians to death for 'the Name'; it was a crime in itself to be a Christian. Thus to be a Christian was to be insecure, sought out perhaps, in danger of death. This does not mean that persecution was common or frequent in the first century; but it is the background to the Christian life and thought of these years, and there were times

when persecution did break out, or appear imminent. The Epistle to the Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation make specially interesting reading in this light. 1 Peter and Revelation, written for Christians in Asia Minor, were concerned to strengthen the Fellowship to withstand persecution. In Asia Minor, where the Emperor cult was held in respect, persecution was an ever-present possibility, and in the first three centuries often broke out violently against the Church.

A Church subject to persecution needs effective leadership. In the time of the Apostles this leadership had been found in the eye-witnesses and converts of the first generation, like Peter, Paul, or Barnabas. Though so little is known about them as a class, it is probable that by the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 all, except perhaps John son of Zebedee, had passed away. James, his brother, had perished early, and Peter and Paul had lost their lives about the time of the Neronian persecution. Furthermore, the passing of the eye-witnesses and apostles was also a time of change in the character of the Church. As the first generation of Christians passed into the second generation, the features which marked the primitive Church were no longer present to the same degree. The primitive Church had been Spirit-filled and Spirit-driven. Such organization as existed had been permissive, local, unstereotyped. Its leaders had taken action and its

members had obeyed because united in a Fellowship moved by the one Spirit, who divided gifts among them (1 Cor. 12: 4, 12, 13). The Christian life had been stabilized and its faith guaranteed by the presence of the little band of apostles and eye-witnesses.

But now the missionary Church was giving place to a second generation of Christians for whom the events and experiences of the first generation were more remote. The Church was becoming an institution, with an increasing membership needing pastoral oversight and instruction in the faith, a community suspected by the multitude and disliked by the State, subject to persecution. Its pattern of worship and life had been received from the past; its faith and practice were the concern of leaders who themselves had no first-hand knowledge and experience of the historical events on which their religion was built.

Furthermore, the Church of the apostolic age had increasingly become a Gentile Church, set against a background of pagan religion and philosophy. The first Christian community had been composed of Jewish men and women nurtured in the thought and strict ethical life of Judaism, who carried over into their Christianity a conscious indivisible relation between faith and practice, religion and ethics. The Gentile background provided no such link between religion and life; on the con-



trary, in the Greco-Roman world religion and ethics were unrelated aspects of life. Thus, as in the missionary Church today, pagan thought and practice were inevitably a danger to the growing Church of the first century; Gentile Christians entered the Church with an unfamiliar background.

The immediate result of this was the danger, indeed the existence, of false teaching. Paul, in all his letters written to Christian communities in an exclusively Gentile environment, finds it necessary to pay attention to the ethical outworkings of the Christian faith. Just as there can be no association between pagan practices and Christianity (1 Cor. 10: 21), so also those who practise the works of the flesh shall not inherit the Kingdom of God (Gal. 5: 21). The Epistle to the Romans, the most doctrinal of all St Paul's epistles, moves in the twelfth chapter to an exposition of the ethical consequences of the faith. 'I beseech you, therefore . . .' says the Apostle, clearly intending his readers to understand that the practical and ethical outlook of chapters 12-14 is a direct consequence of the doctrine he has expounded.

But Paul had to contend with more than the natural man's failure to carry out the ethical implications of his faith; there was the extreme view, by no means rare apparently, of those who not only taught that religion and morality were

unconnected, but also that the Christian was absolved from all ethical responsibility. This kind of so-called Christian argued, 'Let us sin, that grace may abound' (cf. Rom. 6: 1). At a much later date Jude wrote of those who turned 'the grace of God into lasciviousness' (Jude 4). Paganism of this type, rearing its head in the Church, for long menaced the purity of its life. Revelation condemns a sect, known as the Nicolaitans, who permitted fornication and the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (2: 6, 15).

Various types of heretical thinking are denounced in the New Testament. These were a danger to the purity of the faith, and in some instances threatened its complete overthrow. In his Epistle to the Colossians, Paul found it necessary to warn his converts against those who invaded the Christian community with their 'philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ' (2: 8). The exact meaning of this reference is a little obscure at this distance, but the type of danger he had in mind is well known in any Christian context. Converts mix their background philosophies and beliefs with their Christian theology, or even practise strange theories in preference to the plain teaching of the Christian Gospel.

In a later paragraph in the same epistle, the Apostle mentions those who found excessive spiritual signi-

ficance in the use of or abstinence from certain kinds of food or drink, and made much of supposedly sacred days, and emphasized the worship of angels (Col. 2: 16-18). Here again, what Paul had in mind is not exactly known to us, but the experience to which he points is common enough. The Christian faith was being endangered by invasions from the thought, beliefs, and practices of a pagan environment.

Perhaps more dangerous still, because they cut at the very roots of Christian belief, were certain doctrines that arose out of fundamental elements of Greek thought. In particular there was that Greek view of God's transcendence which rendered him remote from his world, untouched by its suffering, sorrow, and sin; and the allied belief that matter and spirit were opposed principles, with matter as the vehicle of evil and spirit as the vehicle of good. The consequence of this, in the Christian context, was a denial that God could be manifested in the flesh, or that the divine could suffer in the human. The unsurpassed danger in this for the Christian belief that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself' (II Cor. 5: 19) requires no detailed exposition.

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel was possibly designed to combat from the start such heretical teaching: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . ' (John 1: 1, 14). The First Epistle of St John denounces in forthright manner this type of teaching. 'Every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit which confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God' (1 John 4: 2, 3). Such teaching, says the Elder, is 'of the antichrist': it is a denial of the whole Christian faith.

Entry to the Christian Church, as we have seen, was by *baptism*, and the Christian life and devotion was nourished through the *Eucharist*. In a Gentile world that dealt widely in those pagan practices which we describe as magic, it was perhaps inevitable that false ideas of the significance and efficacy of these Sacraments should appear. Certainly converts had not only to be admonished on how to approach the Sacraments and behave at the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11: 17-34), but also to be warned of the danger of misunderstanding their significance. In the Fourth Gospel the author finds it necessary to teach that 'Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3: 5). In a passage which clearly provides corrective teaching on the Eucharist, while Jesus says 'my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed', it is also emphasized that 'it is the Spirit which quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing' (6: 55, 63). The Sacraments are vehicles of



spiritual grace, but their mode of operation lies in the realm of the spirit. They are not magic.

These examples of false teaching in the Church, due to its position in a pagan environment, must suffice. They show the need for strong guidance and sound teaching. Where was this to be found? The primitive Church had maintained the purity of its faith by adherence to the apostolic teaching (Acts 2: 42) and the tradition handed down to them (I Cor. 15: 1-7). Now, as the apostolic witnesses passed away, two means of safeguarding the faith and practice of the Church were adopted.

First, over the years there emerged an organized Church life under reliable and recognized leaders. Each local church seems to have been ruled by its elders or bishops (the words are synonymous, and one can speak technically of presbyter-bishops), persons chosen out of the local community to take responsibility for the care of the membership and to preside at the Eucharist (Acts 20: 28; Philipp. 1: 1). There was also an inferior order of deacons, or 'ministers', thought to have risen from the kind of circumstance and to meet the need that led to the election of the seven in Acts 6. These are classed with bishops in Phil. 2: 1. A number of other ecclesiastical functions are mentioned in I Cor. 12: 28 and Eph. 4: 1. In course of time the monarchical bishop, ruling alone over a community, later a diocese, arose; but not before the second century. The threefold order

of bishops, priests, and deacons represents a later growth in Church organization, which is foreshadowed in the New Testament.

The second safeguard, in addition to reliable men versed in the tradition, was to set down for posterity the substance of the apostolic witness. The first three Gospels were the result. The purpose of these writings, and the gap they were designed to fill, cannot be better expressed than in the words of the preface of St Luke's Gospel.

*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Luke 1: 1-3)*

Towards the close of the century, a fourth Gospel, different in its approach from the other three, made its appearance. This Gospel also was written to foster and establish true belief, namely that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God', because to believe on him is to have life (John 20: 31).

Thus the apostolic witness and authority, stemming essentially from a unique experience, was re-

## EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION

tained in such form as could be passed on to posterity, in the written traditions wisely handled and obediently expounded through the Church. By the close of the first century the Church's life was dependent on 'the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments'.

## CHAPTER 7

### *The Uniqueness of Christianity*

So far in this book, we have tried to strip away some of the trappings, the conventions, and customs of Christianity as it is practised in the world today, by looking behind and within to the events in which Christ was first made known to the world. We have tried to state the earliest beliefs and to describe the first activities which resulted from the impact of Jesus of Nazareth upon the lives of men and women. We have seen that, from the beginning, people responded in varied and contrasting ways to the challenge of his life and teaching. Even among the few who trusted him unreservedly, and whose trust was fulfilled in the certainty of the Resurrection, there was no one way of expressing the good news they had to proclaim, no closely prescribed and rigidly organized form of worship or pattern of behaviour.

Out of the struggles and differences of opinion within the fellowship, and from the fight against persecution by religious and political opponents, there emerged that unique phenomenon in world history which we call the Church. Its members differ widely in their understanding of what it is that constitutes that Church. Those who speak of



its 'organizations' or 'the succession of ordained ministers' must face the consequence that they thereby exclude from its membership a very great number of past and present followers of Christ who believe themselves to be his disciples. Those who hold that what constitutes the Church is its activity in preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments find themselves having to define just what that Gospel is, and what those Sacraments are. They may find that they have excluded by definition some who follow the Christian way without any observance of sacramental ritual. If, thirdly, it is said that the Church consists of Christians, of all who (to use the terminology explained in Chapter 5) are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and in whose lives the fruits of the Spirit are seen, this is a definition so difficult to apply, to test, and to verify through what we can see and measure that those who hold it may seem to retreat behind a veil of vagueness and obscurantism. Nevertheless, one of the main points of our exposition has been that there are no limits to the extent of the Christian Fellowship. No difference of race or pigmentation, of social standing or of sex, can be a barrier to its membership.

The Gospels have preserved two sayings of Jesus which, as they stand, seem utterly opposed. When John, the son of Zebedee, said that the disciples had tried to stop a man who claimed to cure demoniacs

'in the name of Jesus', because the man did not follow with them, the reply of Jesus was 'Forbid him not. . . . For he that is not against you is for you' (Luke 9: 49 f.). On the other hand, when Jesus himself was accused of using Satanic power to cast out devils, he said 'He that is not with me is against me' (Luke 11: 23). Should we not derive from these sayings a double warning? First, that the only ground for saying that a person is not (or not yet) within the Fellowship is that he actively opposes and regards as evil those who do for men the kind of things that Jesus did for them. Secondly that we may not exclude from the Fellowship any who do such things, whatever their attitude to the organization we call the Church may be. If this is the case, we must face the question: 'Is there anything specific about Christianity at all?' How can we attempt to show that it is unique if we have not said exactly what it is?

Three ways of defining the Church have been suggested above. None seems satisfactory, but there is some truth in all of them. Nevertheless, we cannot specify Christianity by saying that it is these priests performing these rites; or that it is those people forming that organization; or that it consists of the beliefs and practices set down in this or that creed, prayer book, or manual of discipline. Other religions have priests, performing similar (though not identical) rites. Other religions are em-

bodied in organized communities, with forms of organization similar to those found in Christian churches. Other religions hold beliefs about God as Creator and Preserver of the world, which resemble (though again they do not exactly repeat) the beliefs of Christians. Other religions require the observance of moral and social codes very like those which Christians observe. It is not in the possession of such things, but in the way in which the ministry, the rites, the creeds, and the ethical pattern of Christianity are all centred upon Christ, that its specific nature lies. For the very Church itself is spoken of as 'the body of Christ'.

There have been many religious movements springing from the work of a single founder, leader, or prophet, which in their development have continued to give to that originator a central place. Many such movements must have died out in the past; similar ones continue to appear today. But among the great world-wide faiths there are two besides Christianity which keep their founder central. Islam is commonly miscalled 'Mohammedanism' because of the importance in its faith and life of the prophet Muhammad. Buddhism seems to have become more and more a worship of the Buddha rather than an acceptance of what he taught.

But the place taken by these founders only serves to show up more clearly the specific nature of

Christianity. This cannot be specified by saying that, in place of Muhammad or Buddha, its founder-leader-prophet is Jesus. What is specific is the nature of the attachment of individuals and the community to him. Christianity is life based upon a certain kind of response to Jesus Christ. The earlier chapters have shown that that response involves certain assumptions derived from Hebrew religion. But it also implies the existence of a community of persons making the response, to which anyone who makes it belongs. Membership is restricted *in no other way*.

The response is such that whoever makes it shows thereby that he believes that in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, living, he has found all that the one God and Father demands as Lord and offers as Saviour. Because this is so, he speaks of Christ as the Son of God, and tries to give him such complete devotion and service as is due from man to God. But this is not an effort made in a man's own strength, as by one who strives to please a master or judge. It is an expression of his gratitude for God's grace, and in so worshipping and serving, the Christian finds new power, new possibilities, which he attributes to the working of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised he would send to his followers.

It is through a community that the knowledge of Jesus Christ comes to the believer. It is the Christian community which has preserved in the Bible



## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

the record of Christ's life and work for men, and which continues to proclaim his presence and his power in its worship. So also the response involves the community. It cannot be given fully in solitude. The believer finds that devotion to Christ demands the whole of his personality; but more – it demands what a man cannot give alone. He finds himself within a Fellowship which is making a joint response in common service and a new life. In all this Jesus Christ remains central. He is the founder, but not merely so. He is the leader who first served God in this new way, but not merely so. He is the prophet who gave men the truth about God and taught them the way of righteousness, but not merely so. Jesus Christ remains central as present, through the Spirit, in the life of his people.

Because it is thus conscious of the presence of Christ, the Christian community believes itself to be open to the truth and power of God as no other community can be. That presence is realized in many different ways. In the reading of Scripture, in the preaching of his servants, men continue to hear 'his voice', the Word of God. In trying to meet the needs of men and women and children, and even in the right use of all that the world provides, animal, vegetable, and mineral, Christians believe that they meet with Christ and are responding to him. Above all, in what they gain from their worship and service together, they find that it is the

same Jesus Christ who strengthens them and gives them vision and hope.

When Christians pray, they do so 'in the name of Jesus Christ', for two reasons. It is in him that they have direct access to God who forgives and empowers and guides, who rules over all. It is in him that they know how and for what ends they should pray. Their prayer becomes their striving to do his will, who expressed in his own life the meaning of his own prayer to the Father: 'not my will, but thine be done' (Luke 22: 42). Finally, Christians look forward to a life which they call 'eternal' because, although it begins here and now in such response to God in Christ, it is not ended by death, any more than the life of Jesus was ended by crucifixion and burial. They do not claim to know the detailed nature of this life, nor 'what heaven will be like'. But they *are* sure that it is, and will be, life with Christ in the communion of his people (the saints), and that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8: 38-9).

Such is the specific relationship between Christianity and its founder by which it differs from all other religions, and which is partially and imperfectly expressed in the organization, in the creeds,

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

and in the worship and service of the Church. The response and its expression remain imperfect because the people who make it, though justified and reconciled to God, are sinners. They do not claim (or ought not to claim) that they are better than other people. The greatest saints have been most conscious of their sinfulness. They know that they can never go far enough in the expression of their gratitude. They see, in the brokenness and disunity of the churches, a sign of this sinfulness, of failure to give complete allegiance to their one Lord, who prayed that all his disciples might be one (John 17: 11, 20, 22). In such humility and repentance, is there not something specifically Christian also? The specific nature of Christianity is defined then by the kind of response which Christians make to God in Christ, and by the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Christian community.

We may now consider the further claim of Christianity to be *unique*. In so doing it is essential at the outset to clarify the sense in which this claim is made. The very assertion sounds intolerant and offensive to those of other religions. Are there not, one may ask, other pathways to God which are equally good? Are not other forms of worship equally satisfying and rewarding? Are not other moral codes just as high, just as productive of the true welfare of humanity? Why hold that uniqueness belongs to Christianity?

It would take far more than the few remaining pages of this book to begin to defend this claim to uniqueness if, in fact, Christianity amounted to no more than a pathway to God, a form of worship, an ethical pattern. For, though these three elements may be discerned in all religions which have a right to be regarded as such, Christianity cannot be reduced to such terms, and many followers of other faiths would be most unwilling to see their faiths so narrowly defined. Men of other religions speak of God seeking men, of what in earlier chapters has been called 'the initiative of God'. They would claim that their worship is more than just 'satisfying and rewarding', for they, too, believe that in their acts of devotion the life of God touches the life of men. Further, their codes of behaviour are not merely the means to good ends in personal and social life, but express what God demands. All religions exhibit a pathway to God, a form of worship, an ethical pattern, Christianity among them. But the significance of these elements lies, not in the pathway, the form, the pattern, but in the fact that these arise in response to God in his initiative touching man's life with a demand.

It is neither right nor necessary for Christians to deny all truth to such claims by other religions. Indeed, anyone who does so denies at the same time an essential part of the Christian understanding of what religion is. For one implication in the belief



## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

in the work of the Holy Spirit is that God has been present in many places and at many times when men have only imperfectly realized his presence.

Professor H. H. Farmer has given the following analysis of the essentials of the Christian experience of prayer, as a guide to the characteristics of any truly religious experience. There is a consciousness of being in contact with what is above and beyond the limitations of life in this world, with 'the supernatural'. There is the consciousness that this supernatural meets us with an absolute demand. There is the assurance that from the same source comes our ultimate, final succour. Finally, there is a distinctive type of feeling associated with the experience, a feeling akin to awe. R. Otto in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, has given a brilliant description of this 'sense of the numinous'. Farmer has been able to use this analysis in a comprehensive classification of religions in his Hibbert Lectures, *Revelation and Religion*. He suggests that wherever these four factors are present there is something which may rightly be described as religious.

In the light of this, we must say that the uniqueness of Christ, as against the actual belief and practice of any religion, including those of the Churches themselves as they now are, is not to be expressed in the form: He is right, and all these are wrong. Rather, what is but partially and imperfectly seen and known in the lives and teachings of

the great founders and prophets is fully and perfectly present in Jesus Christ. The response of any Christian, or of any actual fellowship of Christians, remains partial and imperfect. But it differs from the response and experience of the members of other religious traditions in that it is not condemned to be for ever partial and imperfect by the very nature and origin of the tradition. In Jesus Christ, and in him alone, there is presented to mankind the unlimited and complete demand of God, and the unrestricted and infinite grace which God offers to his people.

It is difficult to find an adequate illustration of the difference between this and the content of other faiths. One can only venture to suggest that the power which is in Christ is as much greater than that which any other religion brings to men as the source of energy which men have discovered in the atomic nucleus surpasses those tiny sources which they tap in burning coal and oil, or in harnessing the downward rush of great rivers like the Nile or the Zambezi. The demand of Christ for total service and self-giving is as different from the codes of Judaism and Islam as the love which can make a man die to save even his enemies is different from conformity to laws which forbid us to murder, to steal, or to enslave other persons.

There are three main respects in which Christianity is unique, three main ways in which the

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

limitations and imperfections of the actual religions of men are taken away in Christ. Firstly, Christianity is unique because, in the person of Jesus Christ, it offers to every person without restriction such knowledge of God as men need. In their search after knowledge of the divine or the supernatural, men have contemplated the world in which they live, and from it have gained some insight into the wisdom and power of its Creator. Most religions do not hesitate to use personal language when talking of God or the gods. A vast number of Africans keep their belief in a Sky-god who rules over all, but also make much of lesser spirits and powers, which are thought of as expressions of God's power in the world, and which are believed to influence the destinies of peoples and families, or to govern some department of human life. For most of those holding such beliefs, life is surrounded and affected by a number of invisible forces, some good, some evil. Their religion, which cannot be sharply divided from things which most Western observers would call magic or witchcraft, claims to bring them knowledge of the ways in which all the powers and spirits can be controlled or placated. In addition, the spirits of the ancestors occupy an important place in the life of the people, for their influence is believed to be great, and they must be honoured and perhaps offered gifts, as in the practice of libation.

## INTRODUCING CHRISTIANITY

In such a tradition, there is much that only experts or priests can tell them about supernatural forces and beings. It is probable that no actual religion claims that the whole truth about God or the gods can be known to men. What men need to know, they say, is to be found in sacred books, which must usually be interpreted by experts; or the truth is known only to a few priests and teachers and other holy men and women. These experts form an essential part of the religious system, and to them the uninitiated must go for guidance. The knowledge of God is not open to all, but is the special possession of a few.

Mention must also be made of those advanced types of religion which speak of the Divine in terms which avoid all comparison with human persons. Thus, among the Hindus, Vedanta Brahminism seems to represent a reversion from polytheism, a revived awareness of impersonal supernatural power, which can bring good or evil to man. Those who seek a way of salvation, of escape from the evil of the world, may come to express their belief in the form of a mystical world-denying pantheism. The world, they say, is *maya*, an illusion. All life is subject to the rule of *karma*, the fate whereby every action has its necessary consequences, and leads inevitably to reward or retribution. Salvation may be achieved by the way of insight, the knowledge that man's soul, *Atman*,



## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

is entirely one with *Brahman*, the world-soul, the whole of reality. This saving knowledge must be attained by means of ascetic practices, a kind of life few can follow.

Buddhism in its earlier form was a very similar system, but had far less interest in providing a philosophy, an intellectual explanation of the nature of reality. The noble eight-fold path is a way of escape from the burden of living, but its followers tended to regard speculation about ultimate truth as a fruitless and dangerous pursuit. In fact, Hinayana Buddhism seems to be a religion without a God, for the end to be achieved by self-discipline and self-denial is *Nirvana*, a state of bliss likened to a dreamless sleep. Much religion of the mystical type ends up in this way with some kind of impersonal Absolute. Into this unity the initiate seeks to be absorbed, by the performance of sacred rites, and by detachment from earthly desires and entanglements. Again, the way is open to the few, and a sharp line divides the religious from the secular life.

In contrast, Christianity proclaims that in Jesus Christ, God, the one Power, has made himself known to men. No expert is necessary to make him known, though the practice of the Church has often been based upon the idea of priestly authority in regard to the knowledge of God. It is not even necessary to be literate to gain this knowledge,

although it must be agreed that much missionary education has been rightly aimed at enabling men and women to read for themselves the Good News of Jesus Christ. But by sharing the life of the Christian community, and by hearing the words of its preachers, who make no claim to secret knowledge, any person, even a child, may come to know God in Christ.

One good reason for regarding the Sacraments as an essential part of the Church's worship is that in them the love and forgiveness of God is proclaimed in action rather than in words. But these are also proclaimed in the work of healing, in caring for the downtrodden and the dispossessed. In Christianity, the knowledge of God becomes simple, not because it is easy to know all about the Divine, but because in Christ, the Word made flesh, God stoops to be known to man. We need not be learned or especially gifted to know forgiveness, self-sacrifice, love, in a father or mother, husband or wife. God is known to us in the man of Nazareth, just as he was known to the plain fishermen, the jealous power-seekers, and the outcasts of society who met Jesus in his earthly life.

What is more, this knowledge of God is not given only to those who are especially good according to the standards of any actual society or culture. There figure in the story which we have

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

tried to tell, and among the members of the first Fellowship, a woman who had been a prostitute, men who had been full of greed and disbelief, many who can only be described as cowards and traitors. Though Jesus assumed in those who first listened to him some knowledge of the Jewish tradition, it soon became possible to carry the good news of God to people of a very different outlook and background. The world-wide spread of Christianity, the change it has effected in the lives of millions of ordinary people, from all lands, confirms what we here assert. In Christianity, the knowledge of God in the person of Jesus Christ is offered freely to all men, and this makes it unique. Whereas men may continue to trust in a multitude of powers, or feel that they are separated from the truth of God by many lesser gods and spirits, or by priests and experts who hold the secrets, or by their own ignorance and sinfulness, Jesus Christ says, through his Church: 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father' (John 14: 9).

Christianity is unique, secondly, because the revelation of God it claims to bring to men is not contained once for all in written words or in the past events. God in Christ continues to confront men in the life of the Church. Just as there are few who claim to know all about God, so also very few religious men would say that what they do know can be fully stated in words, in the way in which a

scientist can state the nature and properties of a substance like common salt, or of a living species like the cotton plant or the mosquito.

Men say that they know God unequivocally as the Creator, or as the Supreme Being who requires obedience to certain laws, or as one whose favour and power can be secured by certain rites and practices. African religions in general make these claims. But much of their 'knowledge' of God is also expressed in these rites and practices; in dances and songs, in the performance of sacrificial and other customs, in the repetition of stories about the Supreme Being and the gods, and in the honouring of the ancestors. What believers in one God would call 'various aspects of the Divine nature' are here expressed in the form of belief in many kinds of powers, some controlling the wind and the weather, others concerned with the fertility of the soil, or with the continuance of the tribe, or with various aspects of social life.

The Muslim and the Jew hold such beliefs to be idolatrous, because they know that there is but one God, the Lord of all, the controller of human history. Where is such knowledge to be found? In their sacred writings, they say; for the Jew in the Old Testament, for the Muslim in the *Qur'ān*. There, the truth about God and what he requires of men is set down in black and white. These writings may need to be explained and expounded by



## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

scribes and teachers, but it is there, fixed, and unchangeable. God continues to work in human history, and to make himself known to those who seek him, but the truth about the nature of God, the manner of his working, and the rites and behaviour he demands, all this is written for ever in the Holy Book.

There are no doubt many who would say at this point that in these respects there is nothing unique about Christianity. The Church has but added the New Testament to the Jewish Scriptures, and preserved the knowledge of God in the great creeds, and in its traditions of worship and the practice of its moral codes. It must be admitted that many Christians, and in particular many missionaries, have talked as if the revelation of God, which is the Church's greatest possession, consists in nothing else but the words of the Bible and especially of the New Testament. For this reason, they have feared all discussion and criticism of the documents in which these words have been preserved, and have equated Christianity with unquestioning belief in the authority of Scripture.

Others have placed equal confidence in the tradition of the Church, holding that the truth of God is known through those who stand in the unbroken line of succession from the Apostles, through those whom they appointed to succeed them, down to the bishops of today. If either of

these types of belief about authority were wholly true, Christianity would remain unique in what it knows of God, but would not be unique in its understanding of the means whereby that knowledge comes to us. Other religions have sacred Scriptures and holy traditions. But neither type or belief can claim exclusively to represent the Christian viewpoint.

There are many Christians who hold that the revelation of God does not consist in the words and sentences of Scripture, nor in the doctrines and traditions of the Church. In making this denial, they are concerned to retain something that was vital in the experience of the earliest Christians, and in particular in the teaching of Paul. This was an openness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Doubtless, the Spirit works through the words of Scripture; doubtless, he is active in the worship and teaching of the Church. But God made himself known at Pentecost quite apart from the ritual of the Temple, the services of the Synagogue, or the reading of the Old Testament. Consider again what has been written on pages 83-5 about the outlook of Stephen. Remember that Paul met the truth partly as a result of seeing Stephen die, when he was later travelling to Damascus. His testimony was that 'our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter, but

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life' (II Cor. 3: 5 f.).

We have seen how the Church, as it grew, and consolidated its faith in the struggle against false teaching, came to know more fully the truth which is in Christ as it defended its belief in him and organized its life. It is true that the record of all this is to be found only in the New Testament, and that what the Church so gained has entered into its tradition. It seems impossible, however, to hold that the revealing activity of God suddenly came to an end when the latest book of the New Testament (whichever that was) had been written. It is equally hard to believe that that revealing activity has continued only through the channels of one form of Church organization, or that its content can be expressed only in word-forms laid down in the first five centuries of the Church's life. For the revelation of God is not words or sentences, creeds or ritual forms. God reveals himself in Jesus Christ. The Church inherited from Judaism the understanding that God is known in his acts in history. What he reveals is not doctrine, or belief, or code, but *himself*.

Part of the importance of belief in the Incarnation, that 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1: 14), lies in this, that God can be known in a historical person who still lives and affects the lives of men. Whilst we value the Bible

itself above all that the world can give, because it is the record of God's revelation of himself culminating in the coming of Christ: whilst we hold sacred the preaching of the Word and the observance of the Sacraments as the known way of God's working: we do not restrict his revelation to those words or channels. For Christianity is unique in that the revelation of God which it finds in a Person continues to make its impact upon men. Christians hold that God has never ceased to make himself known wherever men encounter the living Christ: 'seeing that it is God, who said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (II Cor. 4: 6).

There is yet a third respect in which Christianity is unique. For what God in Christ offers to men is not success in reaching their own goals and desires, but a communion with himself which is both God's goal for men and that in which they find their own complete fulfilment and satisfaction. This can best be understood by looking again at the four essentials of any truly religious experience, as set out on page 135. For Christianity, 'the supernatural', whilst remaining mysterious and wonderful, is known. The glory of God, Creator, Father, Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, brings men to their knees in 'wonder, love and praise'.

But in regard to the awareness of God's absolute



demand upon us, and of the final succour he offers, there appears in Christianity what can be found nowhere else. Farmer has shown that the world's religions can be classified according to the way they relate these two elements, and seek to resolve the tension between them. For there is such a tension at the heart of religion. We know we must give something to God; we hope to receive something from him. Amongst many peoples, especially in comparatively prosperous times and where conditions are improving, what men hope to gain from their rituals, in terms of welfare and plenty in this world, looms far larger than anything religion seems to ask of them.

Where there is belief in many gods and spirits, and their activity is closely related to the maintenance of tribal life, the succour which men find in their religion, a field not sharply distinguished from other aspects of life, consists in such things as freedom from the perils of their surroundings, prosperity in the form of good crops or fine herds unspoilt by disease, and the birth of strong sons who will continue the unbroken family line. Rites connected with seed-time and harvest, and with the great transitions of life, at birth, adolescence, marriage, and the entry of the spirit at death into the world beyond, play a central part in their experience. In order that these good things may be given, and these crises safely passed, it is believed

that certain rules must be obeyed, customs observed, rites performed. But the element of demand so expressed is small compared with the extent of the feeling that, by such acts, the spiritual powers can be persuaded or even forced to give men what they want in this world. The people make appropriate sacrifices and expect the gods to 'deliver the goods'. The element of succour dominates the element of demand.

There are other ways of resolving the tension. The ascetic religious practices of Hinduism and Buddhism indicate a world-weariness which seeks and expects no rewards here. In times of pessimism and decline, there is a tendency to see the succour of religion as beyond this world, and finally as absorption into the One, the Absolute. Now the emphasis falls heavily on the side of demand, and what must be given (or given up) to attain bliss. When civilizations break up, such a faith attracts many, and there are signs of renewed interest in such world-defying mysticism in the Western world of today.

A third attitude is illustrated by legalistic religions such as Judaism and Islam. The protest of their prophets against polytheism is in essence a denial that men can force spiritual powers to do their own will, and a denial that man's cooperation is necessary for the operation of the Divine activity. The faithful within these traditions are aware that they are confronted by the Holy Will of

God. Their understanding of what is demanded thereby varies. It may be seen as the due performance of rites and ceremonies, or the mechanical repetition of prayers. It may be expressed in the high call of the prophets to a life of purity and of merciful care for the needs of all. The succour expected is less closely bound to the level of this life and its desires than in the more primitive religions. It often takes the form of reward in the life to come, a Paradise of sensual delights, or a transformed world in which God will rule supreme in the new age. At its highest, such faith seeks salvation as fellowship with God. At its lowest it remains at the level of longing for earthly delights and comfort. But at all levels, the tension between the elements of demand and of succour is resolved by relating them as obedience and reward. To gain the desired end, one must deserve it by religious devotion and the keeping of a Law.

Earlier chapters have described the struggles of Christianity to break free from such an outlook. It must be admitted that much preaching and popular belief keeps to the conception of Christian service as a means for gaining a reward. But this is not the truth which is in Christ. In him God demands all that a man can give, the full obedience and surrender of the total personality, body and soul. In him Christians see God offering to meet man's deepest need, but not by giving earthly

prosperity, or even by rescue from the pains of hell into the comforts of heaven. What they are offered is a right standing before God, that they may belong to him and be in fellowship with him. Therein lies the true goal of human existence.

One aspect of this can be expressed in psychological terms by saying that through allegiance to Christ the human personality is integrated, and set within a community where full development is possible, so that as a result a man is enabled to reach a fully integrated view of the world and God. But that is only part of what we mean when we say, in religious terminology, that men are justified and sanctified by grace, through faith. The uniqueness lies in more than the totality of the demand and the finality of the succour. For in Christianity, and there alone, these two are seen to be one. From the beginning of the Church, attention has been focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the key event. Here was one who, of all men, had been perfectly obedient to the will of God. He was without sin. Had he been rewarded? On the contrary, he suffered agony of body and spirit, and died the accursed death of a criminal. In his last moments, he had cried out 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mark 15: 24). Was not this the negation of all sense of succour? What can the legalism that pins its faith to the reward for obedience make of this?



## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

The sheer moral force of the facts broke the hold of Judaism. The Resurrection showed that the way of full obedience was at the same time the way of God's succouring. So it is found to be for us, when we give our whole selves to Christ. Obedience and reward are combined, are united in the one new life of communion with God. Being combined, they are both transformed. Reward becomes grace, not earned but freely bestowed. Obedience becomes service, not the keeping of rules, but the free expression of the whole self in gratitude and love to God, in response to grace. Thus is the tension resolved, and what God demands is seen in Christianity to be the best he can give, security, assurance, peace.

In these respects, then, Christianity is unique. Christians find the true knowledge of God in the person of Jesus Christ; they continue to experience the impact of God and his self-revelation in the life of the Church; and they find the goal of the religious quest in the service which is perfect freedom and its own reward. They are no longer using religion as a means to their own ends, or as a way of escape from the harsh facts of life. A life of allegiance founded upon trust in Christ gives them true integration and enables them to face all that the world may do to them. This discovery is made not by believing creeds or performing rituals, still less any one particular creed or ritual. Uniqueness

lies in Jesus Christ, and it is only when men and women make the act of moral choice which is personal commitment to him that they know this unique experience which we have tried to describe.

But when men do make that choice, and are thereby brought by faith into unity with Christ and his Church, then the partial truth of all religion is fulfilled in Christ, and man's total need is met. When men have found so much in Jesus, how else can they speak of him but as divine, as the Son of God? When the outlook and desires and life-pattern of men and women continue to be transformed down through the years, how else can they regard the power which changes men but as the Holy Spirit whom Christ sends? Though no form of Christian teaching or practice fully expresses what God has given to mankind in the Word made flesh, it remains true that nowhere else – not in any other religion, nor in a modern faith like Communism, nor in the worship of the power of money, nor in the scientific control of nature – can be found anything which makes so complete a claim upon man's whole life. In none of these is there anything which can give man, living within the community of the faith, such fulfilment of his own being.

Whilst men seek security in rites and sacrifices, in striving to win merit by being good, or in reliance upon greater political or technical power,

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

the Church continues to make known the truth of God by proclaiming that God is in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Its members continue to set this same Christ before men in the Sacraments and in their preaching, and by demonstrating his presence in their loving service for all. Thus will Christians go on seeking to introduce Christ to men and women so that, having tried the other ways, they may at last turn to him and say with Peter: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life' (John 6: 68).





## Further Reading

THE authors of this introductory study hope that many of its readers will wish to follow up in more detail some of the ideas they have touched upon. The following selection from the vast amount of theological literature available has been made with the aim of suggesting works of recognized scholarship which are to be found in the bookshops, within the scope of the intelligent reader, and not too expensive.

The basic 'textbook' for any Christian is the Bible itself. The Christian Scriptures are available in a number of translations. The *Authorized Version* (A.V.), most commonly used, was made in 1611. The *Revised Version* (R.V.) came out in 1881. Both are authoritative, being translations made by a body of scholars and theologians of the Protestant and Reformed Church in Britain, and issued under the authority of that Church. The Roman Catholic will use neither of these, but his own *Vulgate*, a Latin version of the late fourth century, and its English translations.

The difference between the *Revised* and *Authorized* versions represents the work and results of biblical scholarship over a period of 270 years. This work continues. It comprises the searching out and examining of ancient manuscripts, the comparison of their texts, and the consideration of variations of many kinds, with a view to making available to the ordinary

## FURTHER READING

reader a translation *as near the original as possible*. Recent translations include the *Revised Standard Version* (R.S.V.), completed and published in the United States in 1952, and now available through British publishers; *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Bles, 1960); and, most important, *The New English Bible* (O.U.P. and C.U.P., 1961), a new translation prepared by a group of Protestant scholars under the chairmanship of Professor C. H. Dodd.

For the *Revised Version*, the Bourgeois 8vo edition, with the *Apocrypha*, is highly recommended. If this is too expensive, the Brevier 16mo (R.V. for schools) may be obtained. A cheap edition of the *Revised Standard Version* (Nelson, 1957) is now available.

It is useful to have at hand an atlas, such as the *Westminster Smaller Bible Atlas*, edited by G. Ernest Wright and Floyd V. Filson (S.C.M., 1958).

Chapter 1 of our book asks a question which is discussed in the closing chapters of N. Micklem, *Religion* (H.U.L., 1948), and in A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion* (Penguin Books, 4th edition 1953), both of which contain lists of books for further reading on the religions of the world. Those wishing to study further the nature and purpose of missionary work will find the following helpful and challenging: Max Warren, *The Christian Mission* (S.C.M., 1951), and D. M. Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgement of God* (S.C.M., 1953).

For further reading on Chapter 2, three books are recommended. S. A. Cook, *Introduction to the Bible* (Penguin Books, 1944), provides an introduction to

## FURTHER READING

the Bible as a whole. For the Old Testament, *The Clarendon Bible*, Vol. I, by W. L. Wardle, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Clarendon Press, 1936), is a good review, and H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (Duckworth, 1952), deals with the distinctive doctrines.

J. S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), could be used to supplement Chapter 3. There are numerous similar studies, of which A. M. Hunter, *The Work and Words of Jesus* (s.c.m., 1951), and Vincent Taylor, *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1954) are recommended, together with two smaller books, *Luke's Portrait of Jesus* (s.c.m. 1949), and *The Claims of Christ* (s.c.m., 1955), both by Hugh Martin. W. Barclay, *The Mind of Jesus* (s.c.m., 1960) is very helpful.

How did the New Testament come to be written? When, where, and by whom? This intriguing subject can be approached with the help of J. W. Hunkin, *The New Testament* (Duckworth, Colet Library, 1950), and A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (s.c.m., 5th edition, 1957). For information on the Gospels in particular, C. H. Dodd, *About the Gospels* (c.u.p., 1950) is recommended. The same author has a world-famous book on the subject of Chapter 4, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (Hodder, 1951). Also helpful is J. B. Phillips' *New Testament Christianity* (Hodder, 1958), whilst the early history in relation to later developments is discussed in R. W. Moore, *The Furtherance of the Gospel* (o.u.p., 1957). This is Vol. II of a series, 'A Primer of Christianity',

## FURTHER READING

of which Vol. I, is I. W. Marson, *The Beginning of the Gospel* (O.U.P., 1958) and Vol. III G. B. Caird, *The Truth of the Gospel* (O.U.P., 1956).

The Gospel according to St Paul and the questions discussed in Chapter 5 are the subject of A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel* (S.C.M., 1954). The story of the great missionary Apostle is told in A. D. Nock, *St Paul* (H.U.L., revised edition, 1948). A short commentary on the Epistle to the Romans should be read, e.g. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Fontana, 1959), or A. L. Griffith, *The Roman Letter Today* (Lutterworth, 1960). The growth of the Church and its teaching during the lifetime of the Apostle is outlined in an excellent book: G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (Duckworth, 1955). See also G. Dix, *Jew and Greek* (Dacre Press, 1953), and J. W. C. Wand, *The History of the Early Church* (Methuen, 1949).

The specific nature of Christianity is best discovered from books on doctrine such as J. S. Whale *Christian Doctrine* (C.U.P., 1952), and J. R. McPhail, *The Way, the Truth, and the Life* (Wyvern, 1958). On the uniqueness of Christ, see W. R. Maltby, *The Significance of Jesus* (S.C.M., 1948). The most recent large work discussing this question is H. Kraemer, *Religion and The Christian Faith* (Lutterworth, 1956). The whole of Chapter 6 owes much to H. H. Farmer, *Revelation and Religion* (Nisbet, 1954). On the nature of religion, R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Penguin Books, 1959), is very important.







# AFRICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

*Thomas Hodgkin*

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African political parties have developed at a startling rate during the period of 'decolonization'. This is the first comparative study of such parties over a very large area, extending from Morocco to Moyen-Congo, from Senegal to Somalia. Thomas Hodgkin has been able to draw upon many years of study, travel, and friendship in Africa to provide a clear guide-book to current political developments.

This is not just a factual survey, but an illuminating analysis of the origins, structure, aims, and activities of the various kinds of parties. An important distinction is made between mass-parties and élite parties, and many pertinent questions are asked. For example, why the tendency towards single-party systems in some independent African States? What meaning can we attach to 'democracy' in Africa? By what means do African parties capture mass support? A useful appendix gives details of the main parties operating during the period 1945-60, a navigational aid to the sea of political initials for which many will be grateful.

The book is primarily addressed to those Africans 'whose interest in political parties is practical as well as academic', though it will also assist all who are trying to understand Africa from outside or from within.

*This is another book in the Penguin African Series*



This book is another in the Penguin African Series, especially designed to provide background information and front-rank comment concerning this increasingly important continent. A variety of topics are dealt with, including politics, economics, science, social problems, literature, and history. Some books deal with Africa as a whole, others with particular regions; they may present new material on African affairs or traditional subjects viewed from an African rather than a European standpoint.

Here is a book about Christianity which is different, because it strips away some of the conventional trappings of the faith as it is practised in the world today. It will be read with interest by believers and non-believers alike, even those brought up outside the Christian tradition altogether. The authors, although they are committed Christians, try to do no more than 'introduce' a religion whose essential claim is its uniqueness. They provide a background for the story of Jesus by explaining the beliefs of the Jews he addressed; they speak factually of Jesus and of the people who knew him, and go on to describe the work of St Paul and the Church's expansion.

Although the book makes it clear that Christianity is unlike any other faith, it emphasizes that race, colour, class, caste, sex, or age can never exclude a human being from the fellowship of the Church.

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